A Seasonal Guide to Nature's Wild Harvests
THE FORAGER'S CALENDAR
JOHN WRIGHT

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PROFILE BOOKS

For Martin, my dear friend from Sleepy Valley

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NOTE TO THE READER

Eating wild plants, fungi, seaweeds and animals is not without its perils. Accurate identification is essential, and nothing should be eaten unless you are certain of its identity and thus edibility. This book provides sufficient information to identify all of the species mentioned, with the more difficult species described in appropriately more detail. It is not, however, a book designed primarily for identification purposes, so it is often worth checking with a further source.

Wild foods are often unfamiliar foods with the potential to disagree with individual metabolisms. This is particularly true of fungi. When eating something new, it is always worth consuming a small amount first to see if you like it and it likes you.

Some wild foods are not suitable for people suffering various infirmities and some are not suitable for expectant or nursing mothers. Advice on these is provided within the text.

Always collect from clean environments and always wash plants and seaweeds.

Most species of fungi are best cooked, and some are moderately poisonous if eaten raw.

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INTRODUCTION

At some point during September my father would announce that it was time to pick blackberries. Everyone would move instantly into action. Mother unearthed baskets, and a couple of hooked walking sticks were recovered from the aromatic cupboard under the stairs. Sandwiches were made, and a flask of tea prepared. My young sister was dragged away from her game of ‘Cindy Buys a New Dress’ and bundled into my father’s 1928 Morris. By the 1960s the Morris was already sufficiently venerable to cause comment. We loved it and called it ‘The Bus’, and it ferried us over Portsdown Hill from our Portsmouth home to the glorious wilds of rural Hampshire. Those days were prickly, messy and sweet, and I loved them.

Our other family passion was to go cockle-hunting in Langstone Harbour, to the east of Portsmouth, plunging our hands in the sticky mud to find our prize. That too was a joy, though I thought cockles much inferior to blackberries as a food.

Just childhood memories, of course, but it was only recently that I began to view them in their true light. Those days were the best of my childhood because, unlike television and school, they felt completely real.

Hunters and gatherers. That is what we are, and nature rewards us, not just in the food these pursuits provide but also in the more fundamental form of rewarding our souls. On those blackberry-picking expeditions I was doing what I was meant to do, and it felt so right.

The modern world views hunting as barbaric and gathering as an absurd affectation, at best, and a damaging imposition on the natural world, at worst. But searching out our food is completely natural, with a history going back to the first animals. What it is not is a ‘fad’ or, worse still, a ‘middle-class fad’. For our recent ancestors, and even in living memory, foraging was the natural and obvious way to obtain food. Now the obvious thing to do is go to the supermarket or order a takeaway. In this we have lost so much, and food is merely pleasant fuel, a commodity. When we forage, we truly know the organism we choose to collect, its mode of life, its beauty, its value and its season, and in a way unobtainable from food that is bought, we feel we deserve it, we own it.

I have led around seven hundred forays over the last quarter of a century, showing people how to salt for razor clams, catch brown shrimps, identify mushrooms and plants, and the joys of seaweed. People seem to enjoy our days out, often more than they think they will. I take no great credit for this; all I do is explain things and, above all, slow my companions down. On seeing the abundance of mushrooms, or the wild extravagance of berries, a frequent comment is, ‘Have you brought me to a special place?’ The answer is that, yes, it is a good place, though much like many others. The difference is that today I have given them time to look.

Searching for wild food has a powerful effect on how people see the natural world. They suddenly find themselves a part of it, rather than merely an onlooker. Authorities and landowners do us all a disservice by making us ‘keep off the grass’, and the many excellent television programmes on natural history leave us in no doubt that they are showing a world beyond our horizons, not a world to which we belong.

Foraging immerses us in the world, and we come to know it, love it and seek to protect it. We see things we have not seen before or even imagined, such as the spectacular gall known as ‘Robin’s Pincushion’ or the bright orange of a rust fungus on a leaf. I know that I have succeeded on one of my forays when I hear someone say, ‘A walk will never be the same again!’ My aim in this book is not just to show you how and when to find free, wild food, but also to encourage you during your expeditions to view the natural world around us as more than a painted backdrop to our lives, and as something exquisite in its detail.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is in the form of a month-by-month account of what can be found when. I knew this to be a task of compromise and difficulty long before I put pen to paper. Nature has its own ideas of when things should appear, and even of whether they will appear at all. I have found Horse Mushrooms in April and Wood Blewits in June, both species half a year too early (or too late). But there is *some* pattern, and it is recorded here to the best of my ability and that of those naturalists and foragers I have consulted.

Most wild foods are available for more than a single month. At the back of the book you will find a calendar which lists all the wild foods mentioned in the text, placed in the months in which they might be found and with an indication of when is their main season. This information can also be found within each monthly chapter.

I have placed all the main species descriptions in the first month that their flowers, fruit, etc. are likely to be available in good quantity and condition — the most reliable month, to put it another way. Some species produce more than one edible item. The Elder, for example, provides flowers in June (and late May and much of July) and berries in August and early September. So the description of the Elder, its flowers and its berries is provided in the June chapter. In August and September the berries will be listed at the beginning of the chapters as available, and you can check back in June to find a more detailed description of the plant.

This ordering does not work for every species — Wood Ears, for example, can be found at almost any time of the year, so I have placed this mushroom in January, when it is fairly reliable (and, quite frankly, January needed a bit of a boost).

There is a side effect to this format. While many species can be found in November and December, none is first at its most forageable during these months, so November and December have only brief descriptions, along with lists of what can be found then.

This book provides photographs and descriptions that should be enough for a reliable identification. The introductions vary in detail, depending on how difficult a species is to identify. Almost no description is provided for

blackberries, but the Blusher (an excellent, edible fungus which could be confused with something unpleasant) is described in minute detail. My house is threatened with collapse under the weight of several hundred books which (with the application of a patience I sometimes lack) enable me to identify anything from diatoms to nematode worms. While you do not need to follow me in this madness, I strongly suggest a few extra books devoted to the identification of plants and fungi, at least for the more difficult species. I will always double-check an identification in every relevant book I possess. There is a list of recommended books in the Further Reading section.

I am a great avoider of introductory chapters, wishing to get straight to the meat of any book. However, I encourage you to at least read through the following notes dealing with conservation, the law and safety. Failure to do so may result in loss of karma, liberty and life respectively!

This is not a recipe book. However, I have included partial and some complete recipes within the text and suggest uses for most of the species here described. At the end of the book some processes that are useful for preserving wild foods, such as bottling juices, are described.

John Wright
Dorset, 2019
www.ediblebush.com
www.foragerscalendar.net

CONSERVATION

Who would have thought that so benign and natural a pursuit could bring such trouble? I occasionally find myself in the newspapers accused of, for example, stripping the New Forest bare of fungi (a personal favourite of mine) or of encouraging others to strip the British coast of every living thing. People quite enjoy being angry over some perceived failure of others, and newspapers need to make a living. As you will imagine, I get a little upset each time such a story appears. But it is never what I actually do that upsets them: it is always what they *think* I do. My professional foraging friends sometimes fall foul of similar intemperate reports.

It is actually quite hard to do a great deal of damage when foraging, with a certain amount of extra effort required to make a good job of it. Stripping all 400 square kilometres of New Forest fungi without the help of a B-52 bomber is really quite an enterprise, and it is tricky to find anything worth damaging when picking Blackberries, Nettles, Wild Garlic and most of the rest of the plants in this book. Leaving farm gates open (or closing them when they are open already!), trampling over flower-rich pasture or species-rich muddy estuary, uprooting entire plants when only a few leaves or flowers are needed and other forms of boorish behaviour will do some damage and should obviously be avoided, but not foraging itself.

The natural world suffers great damage at our hands, but not from careful foragers. For many years I collected sea beet from a particularly productive spot along the Dorset coast, carefully removing a leaf here and there. The area also sported wild gladioli, Alexanders, wild onion, rock samphire and many other plants, plus a charming, if worrying, population of adders. In 2018 I went to collect enough for tea, only to find that the whole area had been bulldozed to make way for an extensive lawn and a row of deckchairs. I have endless stories like this, and I have little doubt that you do too.

The careful forager behaves with good manners, taking only what he or she needs, leaving some for others and more than enough for the continuation of the species. The careful forager will also be choosy about

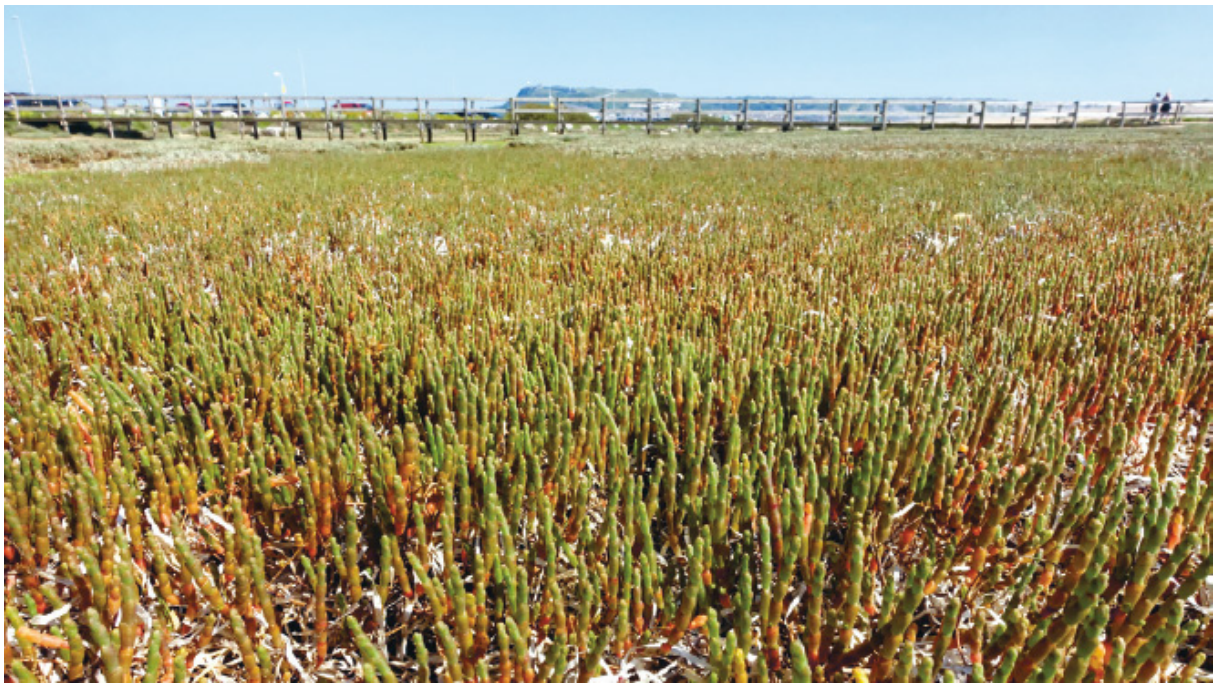
what is collected, though no species in this country is so valuable that a fortune can be made from over-picking it.

Most plants in this book are, effectively, weeds, and no amount of picking them can do any damage. Some are invasive species, so the more you pick the better! No organism I recommend here is rare, though some will require more care and restraint, and a few are included only for interest and completeness.

Some consideration should always be given to whether a plant is annual, biennial or perennial. The last of these allow a certain amount of liberty for the foragers as they are long-established organisms. A crab apple, for example, needs only one seed out of the hundreds of thousands it will produce during its lifetime to grow successfully to maturity for the species to continue. Annuals need to produce offspring every year to survive. If you removed an entire population of annuals (marsh samphire, for example), there would be no seed for next year and there might not be a seed bank available.

Most fungi are perennial, in that they arise from a mycelial net that is permanently underground or within a woody substratum. A mycelium may last for a hundred years or more — some of them are ‘visible’ in the green rings of darker-coloured grass seen in old grassland. During that time it may produce several thousand mushrooms, each of which will produce billions of spores. We are now into the trillions of spores. Only a few of these need to germinate in order to produce a new, productive mycelium. Establishing a new ‘colony’ is difficult, and with long odds, but then there are a lot of spores.

Picking mushrooms, then, is a little like picking apples from a tree — you would need to collect a very great deal to risk affecting the viability of a species in any particular area. The difference between spores and seeds is that the former are haploid, containing only half of the genetic material needed for reproduction. This means that more than one spore must germinate *in the same place* for reproduction to occur, but orders of magnitude more spores are produced than seeds.



Perennial Samphire

This argument is borne out by the inadvertent experiment carried out in continental Europe over the last couple of thousand years. Picking wild mushrooms has always been a part of life, indeed a way of life, in continental countries, with everyone having their favourite spot. Family outings for mushrooms, festivals, markets, exports and so on are common. Mushrooms have been picked on an industrial scale for a very long time, but they still grow. If you buy wild mushrooms from the market or supermarket, they will have been picked by hand somewhere, probably in continental Europe.

While it is unlikely that you would do any harm by picking every Penny Bun you come across, there are still reasons to stay your hand. Other people like to see wild mushrooms as part of the country scene, and woodland stripped bare of mushrooms looks forlorn. Then there are the many species of invertebrates that live entirely on mushrooms. The chief of these are the fungal gnats, but there are many others, each with its own, sometimes baroque, lifestyle. Usually they come in the form of the maggots we so hate, but they are life and deserve their chance. Removing every Penny Bun from the forest may leave many invertebrate species with nothing to eat for a year, and the local population will die out. If it is an isolated wood, it may be a long time before any lost species are replaced.

There is particular foraging sin about which I have strong opinions. I was driving along a country road through a nice piece of Dorset woodland about seven years ago and spotted about thirty boletes (mushrooms with tubes, not gills, the leaf-like structures below the cap). They had yellow stems and were growing on the verge. They looked beautiful, but I did not have time to stop to identify them precisely. When I returned the next day, every one of them had gone, presumably picked by someone who thought they might be edible. My guess is that they were *Boletus radicans*, a fairly uncommon species and lovely to see in such number. They are too bitter to eat, so the fool who picked them would have thrown them on the compost heap.

I call this sort of thing ‘speculative picking’, and it can apply to fungi, plants and seaweeds. If you wish to eat something from the wild, learn about it first, possibly taking a single specimen home to identify, and do not pick any more than that on the off-chance.

If anyone ever questions your life of foraging, then point out that you take only what you need and that you leave wherever you collect your food almost exactly as you found it. The wild remains wild. Not everyone will be satisfied with this, so it is time to bring out the big guns and ask them what *they* eat. Nearly all the methods at our disposal for obtaining food will have an environmental cost. Even the virtuous organic loaf of wholemeal bread will have been grown in a place that was once wild — and could be wild again if we stopped eating wholemeal bread. The forager is a moral animal, so be proud of what you do.

THE LAW

First of all, the law in England and Wales is somewhat different from that which rules the people of Scotland. The chief difference is that in Scotland the ages-old understanding that there was a universal right to roam has been incorporated into law in the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. This simply means that anyone may wander wherever they wish, provided they behave in a civilised fashion, and don't damage crops, frighten the animals or camp out on somebody's lawn. Scotland is very fortunate in this, or sensible, if you prefer. For those of us in England and Wales there is only a slight taste of such freedom.

This book deals with practicalities, for the most part, so if you simply need to know what the law is, skip straight to the summary on p. 27.

We are territorial creatures, and few things will raise voices and tempers as readily as a dispute over boundaries and access. There is a feeling within us that we should not be restricted as to where we can go — it is *our* countryside and the various landowners mere custodians. '*Private. Keep Out*!', except in areas which clearly *are* private, is an incentive to riot and rebellion. We are citizens of a country and view restrictions on our movement within it as the restriction of a birthright. More than this, we are a biological species with the same expectations as other species to roam as freely as practicalities and inclination allow.

Along with the natural right to go where we want comes the right to forage. The type of 'right' here is a fundamental right, not one conferred by others, such as a right to free school meals. Indeed, there is an endemic view within most societies that foraging is a right conferred by a higher authority. We even see this belief codified in the three Abrahamic religions, the cultural basis of a very large proportion of the world's population. For these peoples the right to forage beats most other rights hands down because it is conferred by the highest authority of all:

> *And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.*
> Genesis 1:29

My friend Virginia told me of her erstwhile neighbour Dick, who lived two villages away. This venerable farm worker was wandering around someone's field picking mushrooms when he heard a stern voice from behind him. 'Dick! What do you think you be doing stealing my mushrooms?' Dick's reply came from history and heart. 'They bain't be your mushrooms, they be God's.'

The right to forage is a natural right and one we must defend with vigour, for there are those who would take it away. In 2017 Bristol Council suggested that it would be a good idea to prevent anyone from picking anything in the city. The council received a hard time at the hands of our sometimes glorious fourth estate, which reported this as the 'Blackberry War', and they eventually withdrew the proposal. In 2016 the Forestry Commission, concerned by the level of mushroom-collecting in the New Forest, announced what certainly sounded like a ban on mushroom-picking and put up signs in the car parks to that effect. But people fought back, pointing out that it was a right under law and that confiscating picked mushrooms by the foresters might constitute theft. They now have advisory signs in the car parks asking nicely that people do not pick mushrooms but noting that it is not an offence to do so.

A component of the history of the British countryside is the slow withdrawal of such rights. From Saxon times and probably before there was the 'waste'. This was an area of land within a feudal manor and usually some distance from habitation. Everyone had access to it and could use it for rough grazing and foraging for wood and food. For over a thousand years this incorporation of common agriculture with common access to the provender of the wild continued. But gradually it was replaced by inclosure, where all the land within a manor was parcelled up into private holdings. The waste almost invariably joined the rest of the land in private ownership. Now, the picking of mushrooms or blackberries requires going on to another's land — trespass.

Customary commons, footpaths, public access forest, national parks and right-to-roam land have kept an illusion of freedom of movement, but it is a poor thing indeed. So much of the countryside is closed to us, fiercely defended against intruders. If you have ever met a farmer, gamekeeper or landowner on to whose land you have strayed, you will know how aggressive they can become. A couple of years ago I crossed a style on to a public footpath to take photographs of a field that showed signs of having

been ancient ridge and furrow. Within ten minutes I was being harangued by an apoplectic landowner asking what I was doing. I told him, and he called me a liar and demanded to know what I was really up to. It transpired that he was selling the land for a massive housing development and had earned few friends among the locals. Even when satisfied at my innocent intent, he offered no apology for his intemperance.

I have quite a few stories like that — the consequences of one mild act of trespass, this time to photograph mushrooms, has rumbled on down the years. I have been lucky, I suppose, compared with others who have picked mushrooms or blackberries or bilberries in the past. Newspaper reports abound of people being hauled up in front of the magistrates for picking mushrooms, crab apples, seaweed and everything else. The collecting of bilberries and of seaweed have been the occasion of riot and affray in the nineteenth century, and I have come across three records (mercifully, still over a hundred years ago) of people being shot for picking mushrooms, two of whom were shot dead. The magistrates of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often landowners and seldom took the side of the defendants, so the classic defence of 'The gun went off in me 'and, guvnor' was invariably accepted, and the dead or injured victim was considered to have only himself to blame.

I rather admire a Mr William Miller, who found himself in front of the bench in Croydon in 1911, charged with damaging a gorse bush while picking some blackberries. The chief prosecution witness was a gamekeeper — a noble tribe, though not known for their good humour or forgiving nature. Miller, after being reprimanded for standing in the dock with his hands in his pockets, said that he had a perfect right to gather a few blackberries and that it was a preposterous thing that a man should be brought into a police court for doing so. The magistrate convicted Miller of trespass and fined him 5s. or four days' hard labour. His wife offered to pay, but he would have none of it. Displaying a well-deserved contempt for the proceedings, he said, 'No fear, I'll do the four days.'

THE THEFT ACT

The hundreds of prosecutions for picking mushrooms that have taken place over the last couple of centuries bring to light one of the most fascinating and encouraging parts of English and Welsh law. Many of the farmers who brought an action claimed that the mushrooms concerned were 'cultivated',

and they would point to the various notices they had erected and a pile of manure to prove their point. However, the mushrooms would most certainly have been wild, as Field Mushrooms are impossible to cultivate (the cultivated mushroom is a different species). By stating that they were cultivated, the farmer was attempting to circumvent the law (still in force), which states that plants and fungi growing wild belong to no one and thus cannot be stolen. Again, they almost invariably won a conviction, despite this obvious subterfuge.

However, a clarification, which in turn set a new precedent, was made in Hove in 1887, in yet another case of a landowner taking exception to someone picking mushrooms from his land. The accused was a Master Mansbridge, who had gathered 2s. worth of mushrooms from a field owned by a Mr Gardner. Accusations of removal of ‘herbage’ and damaging a fence were quickly withdrawn, leaving only the picking of mushrooms to be considered. Mr Gardner explained that he earned £6 or £7 from the mushrooms each year. This equates to £700 or £800 now, so it was no small sum. He admitted that he did nothing to cultivate the mushrooms, and that they were, indeed, wild.

The magistrates were proceeding under the Malicious Injury to Property Act 1864 and noted that mushrooms were not ‘cultivated roots or plants’. The section deals with what is property and what is not, and wild mushrooms, flowers, fruit or foliage were not. It is worth noting that the fact that they were of considerable value to the landowner had no effect on the mushrooms as property. The case was referred to the High Court, which duly concurred with what the magistrates had to say.

The Act enshrined in statute a customary ‘right’, and similar good work is now done in the Theft Act 1968. It is worth seeing it as it is written:

> *A person who picks mushrooms growing wild on any land, or who picks flowers, fruit or foliage from a plant growing wild on any land, does not (although not in possession of the land) steal what he picks, unless he does it for reward or for sale or other commercial purpose.*
>
> *For purposes of this subsection ‘mushroom’ includes any fungus, and ‘plant’ includes any shrub or tree.*

If you are on someone’s land, with or without permission, and picking mushrooms, you are not committing a crime. If you do not have permission to be there, you *are* trespassing, but this is a civil, not a criminal, matter. If

you have a basket full of mushrooms, the landowner or agent cannot demand them from you – that would be theft. They *can* tell you to leave, and you should do so by the nearest exit if asked. What you don't have to do is explain yourself or suffer long lectures. Just leave. And close the gate.

As the Theft Act notes, this applies only to *wild* organisms — you cannot take apples from an orchard or dig up someone's carrots (unless you want to end up in a pie). Also, you cannot sell or otherwise gain financially from what you pick. This last part has been challenged by commercial foragers on various grounds, including incoherence. No prosecution that I can find under this section has ever taken place, so perhaps those that might seek to prevent commercial foraging by invoking the Act are not too sure about it either. The Theft Act does not apply in Scotland, but much the same rules do apply there.

THE CROW ACT

The Countryside and Right of Way (CROW) Act 2000 was a piece of legislation long overdue, and a small victory for the common man who wished to reclaim his lost access to the countryside. Much of England and Wales was opened to the public for 'recreational purposes', usually in upland areas, downlands, heath and mountain. Most of the land involved was deemed by the authorities to qualify for CROW Act status no matter what the landowner may have thought, though appeals against this were allowed and many were made, the most notorious of which was by Madonna. Some of the land was given CROW Act status voluntarily ('dedicated', in the parlance) by the landowner, the Forestry Commission being one of the more notable bodies to do so. This all sounds very positive, but there is a short and infuriating clause in the CROW Act that makes land opened up to the public useless to the forager.

The Act opens up land for 'recreational' purposes, though what those might be is not defined positively. What they are *not*, however, *is* defined. The Act contains a list of prohibited activities that was evidently written by a legislator with a sense of humour. Failure to comply is not necessarily a criminal offence; it simply removes your right under the Act to be there. You are not allowed to take any animal on to CROW Act land other than a dog, take part in organised games, commit a criminal offence (yes, but why the need to say so?) or — my absolute favourite — annoy anyone.

To be fair to the legislators, most of the rest are sensible and rather obvious (no lighting fires, off-roading, etc.), but the prohibition that most affects the forager, even a very casual one, is a terrible reversal of ancient custom:

> *Section 2(1) does not entitle a person to be on any land if, in or on that land, he —*
> *(l) intentionally removes, damages or destroys any plant, shrub, tree or root or any part of a plant, shrub, tree or root …*

The good news here is that any rights of way that run through designated land are not part of the designation. Since rights of way generally come with the right to forage, foraging can continue. The landowner is not obliged to impose any of these rules, and so may allow the picking of a few mushrooms or Blackberries.

Notably missing from the list of 'mushroom, flowers, fruit or foliage' mentioned in the 1968 Act are 'seaweeds'. In order to collect seaweed you will need the permission of the landowner, and finding out who the landowner is will likely be the devil of a job. The field adjoining the beach, the beach above mean (average) high water, the intertidal zone and the land below mean low water may all have different owners!

About half of the foreshore (the bit between mean low and high tide) is owned by the Crown Estate, the rest by various duchies, port authorities, the National Trust, local authorities and others. The Crown Estate furthermore owns the land below low water out to 12 miles (19.5 km). Fortunately, although the latter rightly insist on people obtaining a licence to collect seaweed commercially, they are content to allow the collecting of small quantities for personal use. The duchies are likely to be of the same mind, though for the rest I cannot say. Wherever you are, I doubt that anyone will challenge you for carefully collecting a small quantity of seaweed, and if you can get away with it for thirty years in a row, you will establish the right to continue.

THE WILDLIFE AND COUNTRYSIDE ACT 1981

The Theft and CROW Acts are not the only laws that govern foraging. There is also the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, a wide-ranging piece of legislation (applying to the whole of the UK), with only a few small sections that have a direct impact on the forager. The Act introduced the

idea of ‘sites of special scientific interest’ (SSSI), where the ecology of, or the species within, were considered important for conservation.

Certain species may be mentioned in the document that declares an area an SSSI (available on request from Natural England), and it is usually not wise to pick any of these. Even if you did, however, the authorities would need to prove that you were damaging the species concerned. Few organisms are both rare and worth foraging, so it is not a problem for either party. There may also be a ‘catch-all’ clause forbidding the removal or damage of plants, fungi and animals, but again proof of damage would be needed. Many people think that it is illegal to pick anything on an SSSI, but it is not so, and Natural England tend to take a sanguine view of people picking blackberries or the odd Sorrel leaf.

There are a few species that cannot be legally picked: four fungi and just over a hundred flowering plants. There are also several lichens, mosses and so on. Regardless of their rarity, no one would intentionally collect any of the plants for the table as none of them is worth eating, but one of the fungi, the Bearded Tooth, *Hericium erinaceus*, is edible and, unfortunately, very tasty. I have seen it a few times, growing on seriously rotting oak, and very splendid it looks. The photograph of it here was taken in October 2016. It is a criminal offence to pick any of these species, and the prize for worst forager of the century goes to the woman who posted pictures on social media of herself with two carrier bags full of Bearded Tooth. This sort of behaviour gives sensible foragers a terrible and undeserved name.

No one would have any objections to the above provisions of the 1981 Act, but there is one for which no serious, rational reason for its existence can be imagined.

(I) *Subject to the provisions of this Part, if any person —*
(a) *intentionally picks, uproots or destroys any wild plant included in Schedule 8; or*
(b) *not being an authorised person, intentionally uproots any wild plant not included in that Schedule,*
he shall be guilty of an offence.

Sub-section ‘a’ refers to the plants, fungi, mosses, etc. listed in Schedule 8 (available on Natural England’s website), to which no one would have an objection. Sub-section ‘b’ is everything else that might (very) loosely be included in ‘plants’. The phrase ‘not being an authorised person’ saves the gardener from criminal prosecution for digging up Ground Elder from his or her flowerbed as he or she is ‘authorised’ by being the owner or custodian of the land on which it is growing. Apart from ownership or

tenancy, permission from the owner or tenant will make you an authorised person, and no offence will have been committed. This means that if you wish to collect dandelion roots for a ‘coffee’, burdock roots for a beer or horseradish to go with your Sunday roast, you will need to get permission.

Since all the plants thought to be in need of protection are included in Schedule 8, it is difficult to imagine what problem the law seeks to address by imposing such a blanket ban. Digging up a few roots from the roadside causes no more damage than pulling over on to a verge in a car, and probably far less. It certainly causes less damage than that so painstakingly achieved by ill-timed verge-trimming, which destroys all of the annual flowers before they have a chance to set seed and leaves a nitrogen-rich and perennial weed-inducing mulch as an afterthought. Two species that might have been lurking at the back of the legislator’s mind are bluebells and snowdrops. These, being bulb plants, are easy to uproot and easily survive the indignity. But these are protected anyway (the latter internationally), as are all our orchids.

One might think that no one would prosecute under this law, but I met a magistrate who was called upon to pass judgement on someone digging up horseradish without asking for permission from anyone. He thought the whole thing a waste of his time, but magistrates have no discretion except over sentencing — ‘Fined £10’. The poor fellow who had to pay the ten quid would, obviously, have been out of pocket for that sum, but also in possession of a criminal record.

Fungi are not plants in reality, but may be considered as such under parts of the Wildlife and Countryside Act. This has led some people to consider the clause about uprooting real plants to apply to the ‘uprooting’ of mushrooms. Since picking a mushroom removes only part of the fungus, with the perennial mycelium left unaffected, it is a hard point to argue and, as far as I can tell, has never been tested in court.

One more thing must be considered. If you set out with pick-axe and spade to dig up any wild plant and do not have authorisation, you could be charged with ‘going equipped’, a much more serious offence, with the potential for fifteen years in gaol.

KNIVES

Worse still is the possibility of being accused of, and sentenced for, knife crime. The law is more aggressive in its stance than most people think, with little discretion allowed on the part of the attending officer or anyone else involved, so you are likely to at least get your day in court. Here is what the law says:

> *It is illegal to: carry a knife in public without good reason, unless it has a folding blade with a cutting edge 3 inches long or less.*

This means that a *small* Swiss Army knife or anything similar is OK, as they are less than 3 inches (7.5 cm) long and do not lock. Every other blade, even a tiny one, will be illegal to carry if it is fixed or lockable. If you are questioned by anyone in authority as to why you are carrying a legal blade in public, your answer should be ‘Because I can’. But say it politely. Your Stay Out of Gaol card if your blade is longer than the legal limit is the phrase ‘without good reason’. There do not appear to be many good reasons for carrying a knife, and some of them suggested in the Act — such as being on your way to a historical re-enactment or that you are carrying it for religious reasons — need proof. The only one suggested by the government that is vaguely applicable to the forager is ‘taking knives you use at work to and from work’. Whether you or, more pressingly, the police or the courts think that mushroom-hunting is a good reason is something you may have to find out the hard way.

If it all goes wrong and you are found with a knife to which an officer of the law takes exception, it will go wrong badly. The best you can hope for is the offer of a caution, but even that will leave you with a troublesome criminal record. A suspended sentence is a possibility, but half of those convicted (and overall conviction rates are high) are sent to prison, with an average sentence of seven and a half months.

SUMMARY

There is a general right to collect the ‘four Fs’ — fruit, flowers, foliage and fungi — from any land, provided it is growing wild and that you do it for your personal use. This does not apply to seaweeds, though any detached seaweeds still floating in the sea are legally collectable.

This right does not, generally, apply to land designated under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, except where there is a footpath or other historic right of way or access, when the right to forage is retained.

Trespassing is a ‘civil wrong’, not a criminal offence, though you could in theory (and very occasionally in practice) be sued for the value of your occupation. You should not trespass, and if challenged for doing so, you must leave by the nearest exit. Anything you have foraged while you were there is yours and cannot be legally confiscated.

It is illegal under the Wildlife and Countryside Act to remove an entire plant (uproot) without permission from the landowner.

There is usually a prohibition on removing any organism from land designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest, though the governing authority is often fairly relaxed about low-level and sensible foraging and would need to prove damage to take action against you.

You should never carry a knife which has a lockable blade over 3 inches (7.5 cm) long, or a blade of any length which is fixed, unless you are confident that you can convince any officer of the law that you have a good (legal!) reason to have it.

PHENOLOGY

Phenology is the name for the study of the seasonal timings of biological events. Historically, it was concerned with occurrences such as first leaf burst, leaf fall, flowering or fruiting, or on hearing the first cuckoo in spring. In its modern form the science deals with the general timing of any biological event. It has always been a poor science, with historically random and incomplete data sets and new data sets that are tiresome to acquire, too short and difficult to interpret. In recent years phenology has had a boost in its fortunes as it informs, or attempts to inform, theories of climate change.

Since most historical records report the first or last occurrence of a biological event in any one year, phenology can, by its very nature, be the study of statistical outliers. Such outliers are matters of popular interest, with letters to the editor informing the world that their daffodils bloomed in December or that they spotted some ripe blackberries in mid-June. These reports are often put down to climate change, but outliers tell us nothing and have their own history: field mushrooms in May and gooseberries in January are featured in reports from 1906 and 1788 respectively. For the most part these are due to microclimate, stress and odd weather, rather than climate.

The climate is always changing, and it has certainly become warmer over the years — about 0.6° C globally since the late 1970s, depending on whose data set you look at. This has had a noticeable effect, with earlier leafing, blooming and fruiting. A study in 2010 reported that average leafing, flowering and fruiting for some fifty species of plant was about six days earlier than thirty years previously. While such studies are informative, it must be remembered that the signal-to-noise ratio is poor, with any one year likely to diverge markedly from the discovered means.

Mushroom seasons too have changed. A paper published in 2007 reports a very rapid lengthening of the fruiting period of 315 species of larger fungi. Between 1950 and 2006 the average fruiting period increased by a truly remarkable forty-two days, from thirty-three to seventy-five. I knew

that something like this had happened from my own observations, but I was surprised that it is by so much.

Lengthening seasons, or earlier or later seasons, are all liable to variation, but in this book I deal with how things are now. Even if all the data for this were available, it would not necessarily tell you when Elders come into flower or when the first field Blewit makes an appearance in any particular year. Our climate is temperate in general, but modified in detail by the vagaries of the jet stream and other factors, with one year being very different from the next or the one before. I have provided a range for each species and have indicated for many when is the most likely time to find it in good condition and abundance.

It is, however, worth bearing in mind, for example, that a dry spring will result in few or no spring mushrooms, early flowering (and for a shorter length of time) and, if the dry weather continues, early fruiting. A wet spring and early summer will produce lush leaf growth, and a dry autumn will reduce the abundance of mushrooms, as will an exceptionally wet one.

I look at the natural world through the leaf-green-tinted spectacles provided by the relatively warm and wet south-west coast of England. My personal perception is therefore of leaves, flowers and fruit appearing early and the mushroom season being longer. I have attempted to keep this in mind while devising the charts in this book. At the other geographical extreme is Scotland, where leaves, flowers and fruit appear later (a week or sometimes two) and the mushroom season is shorter and usually earlier. Even this can be confounded by a reversal of normal fortunes and an early, damp heatwave landing in springtime Midlothian while dry, frosty weather still rules in Dorset.

Despite my gloomy opinion of phenology and carping complaints about variability and unpredictability, I have done my best to put everything in more or less the right time of the year. Just bear the weather in mind, for it is the weather that rules all.

SAFETY

PHYSICAL DANGERS

There is little that is dangerous which is peculiar to the world of foraging — until, of course, you collect and eat the wrong thing. Other dangers consist of the minor and major perils that attend any walk, such as banging your head on low branches, getting splinters and tripping over bramble stems or rabbit holes. Seashore foragers should look out for crumbling cliffs, deep and sticky mud, and those gaps between rocks that allow your foot to slide easily in but not easily out again.

Most danger is easily avoided by taking care and dressing appropriately for weather and terrain. The intertidal zone is a special case, as it requires local knowledge. Tides are almost entirely predictable, deviating from the prediction only in the case of extreme weather, but you *must* know them.

If your search for seaweed takes you to the intertidal zone, you must have accurate tide tables (which are readily available online for the following seven days) to know when to go and when you will be safe. I always collect on the ebbing tide, as it gives more time to find what I am after and more time to return to my car before the tide comes back in. Knowledge of one area will count for nothing if you are in another tidal area: tides can behave very, very differently within a short length of coast. Another thing that must be remembered is to allow for British Summer Time. It may be included in your tables or it may not — and you need to know which, because it may mean timings are wrong by an hour. Some online tables allow you to change it with a tick box.

SAFE COLLECTING

The key to all safe collecting is correct identification. Throughout this book I've tried to give clear descriptions of species where necessary, but if you want to be sure that something is edible, it's always best to double-check your finds against a second source. On almost every foraging expedition you will encounter something deadly poisonous, even if it is in your back garden, so do take this matter seriously. It is just a matter of being careful rather than reckless. I have eaten over 120 species of wild fungi and

perhaps 200 species of wild plant without as much as a mild stomach ache. I have been OK, and you will be too if you identify with care, don't jump to conclusions and don't eat anything unless you are 100 per cent sure you have it right.

Touching a Death Cap or any other poisonous fungus will have no dangerous consequences: the toxins are powerful, but the tiny amounts likely to be absorbed are just not enough to cause problems. This is not to say that you should handle Death Caps all day with abandon: if you touch one by accident, just wipe your hands as soon as you can (and certainly before eating anything).

Some plants do produce chemicals of sufficient potency for skin contact to cause poisoning. One is foxglove; another is hemlock. In the past children were poisoned by hemlock sap by using the hollow stem as a pea-shooter. There are descriptions of these and other dangerous species later in the book, so that you can avoid them on your foray.

Do keep your specimens separated in your basket or have a separate basket for the unknowns, in order to avoid contaminating your prospective dinner with something that turns out to be dangerous.

I am very strict on my mushroom forays, partly because they are educational and will involve species known not to be edible. I always have two baskets, and I check what goes in the edible basket. Everything from the latter is laid out at the end of the day, and each specimen examined carefully and discarded if it is in poor condition or there is the slightest risk of a wrong identification. A careful photographic record is made, and nothing is ever added to the collection after that. You will not need to go to such lengths, and indeed I do not do so for seaweeds and plants, but there is everything to lose if something goes wrong, so have your own system.

Quite where you collect your wild food is also a matter for consideration. I am fairly sanguine about this, so unless something is growing immediately alongside a busy road, on the site of a disused tin mine or beside a path frequented by irresponsible dog owners, I will pick it. Many people refuse to collect anywhere near a road, but contamination is high only within a very few feet of the tarmac.

A more serious problem can come directly from the soil. Plants and fungi are very adept at drawing up dangerous elements through their roots, the cabbage family being particularly talented in this. Since a large proportion of the plants described here are weeds or non-native species,

both types known for liking disturbed habitats, it is a problem you are likely to face. Without doing a geological survey or a chemical analysis of the soil, it will be a matter of common sense and local knowledge.

Again, only eat something if you are 100 per cent sure you know its name and that it is not poisonous. Nearly all poisonings are down to ignorance or recklessness, so I have every confidence that you will be fine. But do remember that the best thing that can happen is a fun day out in the woods and a nice meal. The worst thing that can happen is a fun day out in the woods and a meal that may or may not be nice, followed by a horrible death for you, your friends and your family.

Happy foraging!

KIT

I love kit. Every project I have ever undertaken has required the purchasing of all the best kit I can afford and think of. For many people — especially, dare I say, men — kit is all you need. I have more than is strictly necessary for foraging, and inevitably not all of it is used, except to impress other foragers. More often than not I take only a bag and a pair of scissors; sometimes I take nothing but pockets.

CONTAINERS

A basket or trug is the traditional container to take foraging. I have managed to get through about twenty baskets in my time, all of which were lost, fell apart or got run over by my truck. I now have a superb Somerset basket (pictured here), which was old when I acquired it and has shown no signs of deterioration, though I haven't tried to run it over yet. Baskets are good because nothing gets squashed in them, and you can use other containers within it to separate, protect and keep fresh some of the more delicate plants and fungi. There is an absurd idea that open-weave baskets are better for collecting mushrooms because this allows you to scatter spores from picked mushrooms as you prance about in wood and field. This is nonsense. Spore dispersal from gilled and tubed mushrooms is a finely tuned mechanism and nothing like a pepper pot.

Carrier bags are all but useless, as fungi sweat and become damaged. I do, however, always keep a few cheap, soft, canvas bags in my truck for unexpected finds. I also have a folding forager's pouch, which fits on my belt. It is handy for collecting beechmast and Sweet Chestnuts and, more importantly, makes me look very professional. Seaweeds require little more than a net bag. You will need several, though, as a different bag will be needed for each species in order to avoid several hours of painstakingly sorting it all out later.

KNIVES

Do read the rather terrifying warnings that I provide on p. 6 about the carrying of knives before you decide to take one with you. I usually have a knife with me when foraging, but I don't think that they are terribly useful

for many foraging tasks. However, mushrooms are often cut rather than uprooted. You may be familiar with mushroom knives, with their curved blades and little brush at one end. I find these awkward to use, and I nearly always cut myself with them. You will be well equipped for these tasks with a simple penknife, and if it has a short folding blade you will not face the considerable wrath of the law.

DIGGER

Unless I am sure which mushroom I am picking, I will always gently dig it up. A knife is unsuitable for this purpose, but a little digger is perfect. It is also the best tool for the very gentle digging needed to uproot Pignuts. A cheap, one-inch wood chisel with the sharp end blunted and rounded will work very well.

TROWEL

Sometimes you will need to dig up small plants (though check p. 26 first!), and the strongest and narrowest trowel will be the best to use.

SCISSORS

Scissors are by far the most useful of all foraging implements, as they allow you to cut leaf or frond with accuracy and care. For low-growing plants such as Wood Sorrel, there are sideways-cutting scissors.

SECATEURS

Quite frequently it is easier to take an entire branch home with you rather than pick the fruit or leaves while they are still on the tree. Sea Buckthorn is the prime example of this.

BERRY PICKER

These are available quite cheaply and take at least some of the drudgery out of picking bilberries, cowberries and other berry-bearing plants in the heather family.

FRUIT PICKER

Apples, Cherry Plums, Plums and so on are easy to pick from the lower branches, but it is not easy to reach the higher branches without climbing the tree or bringing a ladder. A fruit picker is the easiest way to reach them, short of standing on the roof of your car (something I do quite a lot). They are fairly expensive, but a simple one can be made from a plastic pipe by making a two-fingered hook at one end with a bit of cutting, filing and bending with heat from a blow-lamp. A project for winter evenings.

CROOK

An alternative to the fruit picker and useful for many other things too, such as out-of-reach blackberries and elderflowers, beating your way through the bush or walking uphill. A crook is made from two pieces of Hazel which have been cut in a scallop to half their thickness near one end. The two cut faces are squeezed together using cramps and bound with twine. The twine is shellacked in place.

BUTTERFLY NET

A good-sized butterfly net is an absolute requirement for catching grasshoppers unless you enjoy the childhood sport of stalking and then grabbing one before it hops away. It is also a useful means of catching the exploding seeds from Himalayan Balsam, and not at all bad for collecting hazelnuts.

BIRCH-TAPPING EQUIPMENT

For details about the buckets, spiles, drills and plugs you will need if you wish to tap birch trees, see p. 90.

CLOTHING

Some people come on my forays dressed for a cocktail party, and I suspect they have never set foot in the countryside before. Assuming you would not dress so unwisely, there are still a couple of tips worth noting.

Dress according to the weather. Wear clothes that will not tear or catch in a bramble bush — waxed cotton is best for this. If it is wet, wear waterproof trousers under a long enough coat. Your legs will stay dry and you can even kneel in mud when picking plants or mushrooms from the ground. Wellington boots or substantial waterproof boots are a must.

A hat is important. If I forget my hat, I feel very disorientated and usually give up and go home. A brimmed hat will shade your eyes from the light, protect your head from branches (while, I must admit, making it much more likely that you will bump into them), keep you warm and protect you from sunburn and rain.

There are a few other pieces of kit worth taking. A loupe for identification, a camera to remember habitats, a little tube of ferrous sulphate to identify brittlegills (a genus of mushroom), a smartphone for recording the position of exceptional finds such as Horn of Plenty, a compass and an identification book or three.

You are now set for the off.

PLANTS

Plants are the most familiar of wild foods and the most varied. Leaves, flowers, seeds, seed pods, stems, roots and fruit are all available from plants, whereas seaweeds and mushrooms are distinctive in themselves but don't offer the same variety. Being so familiar, there is little reason here to go into details of what plants are and how they grow, unlike the less well known seaweeds and mushrooms, where some explanation may be helpful. But there are a few aspects that may be of interest.

Because of the variety of their parts, identification is easier with plants than with the other two groups of organism. It is a trivial task to tell a bramble from a nettle, whereas telling a Fool's Funnel from a Miller (both mushrooms) requires considerably more attention to detail, even though they are only distantly related.

Organisms fall naturally into categories, and I have provided the families to which each plant belongs. Knowledge of the different categories is helpful, since species within a botanical family bear similarities to one another. The commonest family in this book is the Rosaceae, the rose family, containing roses, but also blackberries, sloes, strawberries, meadowsweet and more. If you look closely at any of these, you can detect the commonalities, such as serrated edges to the leaves and 'showy' flowers with five petals.

Some people are very observant, counting stamens and pistils, and can spot an erecto-patent pedicel at ten paces. This level of identification skill is not necessary for any of the plants described here. Still, I always take time when encountering an unfamiliar plant and note everything I see, and I suggest it is worthwhile for you too as it will increase your general confidence and level of skill.

It is much easier to identify plants when they are in flower, and my first point of call is an old book called *The Wild Flowers of Britain and Northern Europe*, by Richard and Alastair Fitter, with illustrations by Marjorie Blamey. I like this book so much that I have worn out three copies over the years. It uses a visual key to show the number of petals or general shape of the flower, plus its colour to narrow down the field. It is available now only

second-hand, but there are many good guidebooks to British plants, and most will have some sort of key.

When identifying plants just as an interested botanist, it matters little if you get it wrong. Identification for the table is quite another matter, as your life may depend on getting it right. Jumping to conclusions seems to be the main cause of failure, and you simply must not do it. ‘It looks a bit like the picture in the book’ is not enough: you should look very carefully at those little details — *all* of which must match the plant you have in your hand. The most notorious family is the carrot family. There are ten species within this large group that get a mention in this book, three of which are deadly poisonous. Here details are important.

Don’t be overwhelmed, though. We need to take great care in the beginning, painstakingly checking the photographs and drawings provided by the books and scouring through the descriptions, but we are very good at getting the ‘feel’ of a plant. My fellow forager Monica uses the comparison of a Savoy cabbage and an iceberg lettuce. They would be virtually identical from any written description, but once you get to know both you would never mistake one for the other. I can identify a large number of plants and fungi while driving past them — I just know what they are because I am so familiar with them, my brain having built a database of what they look like from a thousand different angles. With this familiarity we recognise plants just as we recognise friends, and not from minute details such as length of pistils or how far apart their eyebrows are, but from just *knowing*.

FUNGI

THE MAGICT WENTY

While anyone can collect crab apples or blackberries or sloes, it takes a little more knowledge and practice to forage for fungi. While bracket fungi (fungi that form bracket shapes on trees) such as Chicken of the Woods or the Beefsteak Fungus are very distinctive, with mushrooms all you have is a cap, some gills or tubes and a stem. A Field Mushroom can look similar to a St George's Mushroom and also a Deadly Fibrecap. It is all down to details, and it is to these that you must look when attempting to decide whether your proposed dinner is going to kill you.

Before going into the details of how to identify mushrooms I must reassure you that you do not need to join me in the self-imposed task of trying to identify everything you find and getting very upset when you fail. There are perhaps seven or eight thousand species of the larger fungi in Britain, and no one has ever learned them all, or even seen them all. To be a successful, and not dead, mushroom forager all you need to do is learn a handful of species. If you learn half a dozen, you will know more than most people, and if you learn twenty, you will be able to hold your head high on any public mushroom foray. Most of the species described in this book are candidates for your top twenty, but I list the easiest and best of them, with the easiest to recognise first and the hardest last: Giant Puffball, Hedgehog Mushroom, Chicken of the Woods, Cauliflower Fungus, Shaggy Inkcap, Oyster Mushroom, Horn of Plenty, Parasol, Morel, Bay Bolete, Penny Bun, Common Puffball, Saffron Milkcap, Fairy Ring Champignon, Chanterelle, Trumpet Chanterelle, Field Blewit, Meadow Waxcap, Field Mushroom, Horse Mushroom.

The order I have placed them in is arguable, but it is a reasonable guide. You may be surprised to see Field and Horse Mushrooms placed so far down the list, but these are frequently confused with the unpleasant, though not deadly, Yellow Stainer. The Chanterelle also has a place near the bottom because of the False Chanterelle, which looks so much like it. You will still need to learn to identify these mushrooms somehow, and this can either be from books — which is the way I had to learn — or from someone prepared

to teach you. Spending a day with an expert is very beneficial, provided at least some of the mushrooms are there on that day to be learned. On a good day it is possible to find six or even ten of the top twenty, and if that isn't enough for you, a repeat visit may be needed.

IDENTIFICATION

Identification begins in the field or wood, as habitat is a guide to identity. Is your specimen growing in woodland or grassland? If in woodland, then with which species of tree? Is it growing on dead wood or live wood or on the ground? If on the ground, does it bring half the forest floor with it when you pick it or come away fairly cleanly (a differentiation that will indicate whether it is a leaf litter or mycorrhizal fungus)? Does it grow in clumps, tufts, rings, singly or in troops? Take notes or take a photograph of the specimen in situ, showing its growth habit and perhaps a leaf or two of the nearest tree species. Carefully and without excavating clods of earth, dig them up rather than cut them, as *crucial* characters may exist at the base of the stem: the Yellow Stainer and the Death Cap have such characters, and you may pay with your dignity or your life respectively if you get it wrong. Handle the specimen with great care to avoid damaging characters that may help later. If you use the stem as a handle, for example, any question over a 'faint ring zone on stem' or 'ephemeral bloom on stem' will be unanswerable as all you will see is 'fingerprints on stem'! Fresh material may (or may not) have a smell that is ephemeral, so place your nose just below the cap and sniff gently. If you need to take the specimen back to your basement laboratory for identification, then pack it carefully in a container with a lid. Carrier bags and paper bags are useless, as specimens are damaged and they sweat.

An identification in the field may be possible for most of the species in the above list. But if you need to take them home, you will have to go through 'the process'. Your first step is to find any books you have on mushroom identification — including this one, of course — and take them to your neighbour's house with the instruction that they must refuse to give them back for at least two hours. I jest, of course, but you will need to refrain from the obvious but lazy practice of flicking through all the photos in the book to see if you can spot something that looks a 'bit like' what you have in your hand. There are perhaps two hundred species that look a 'bit like' a Field Mushroom, for example, so the opportunities for error are

extensive. There are circumstances in which flicking through a book *is* acceptable — when your specimen does not have a cap and stem but is instead a bracket fungus or a puffball and so on (pp. 222 and 228 for examples of the latter), or if you have a reasonable idea of what it is anyway. This book contains a larger proportion of the tastiest, commonest and most easily identifiable fungi, so it may well be worth riffling through the pages to see whether what you have in your hand is described here. If nothing here looks a 'bit like' what you have in your hand, then it is probably not edible.

If you have absolutely no idea (I often have no idea, even after forty years of close study, so you will be in good company), it is an excellent start to take a spore print (this only works for species with gills or tubes, though the latter are more difficult). If you have more than one specimen, then cut a cap from its stem and place it, gill or tube side down, on a piece of white paper. If it is small or if the room is hot, place a bowl or glass on top to keep it fresh. If you only have one specimen, then punch a stem-sized hole in the middle of a piece of paper about the size of the cap. Place it over a cup and thread the stem through the hole until the gills or tubes are resting on the paper. Leave for two hours, or even overnight, and look to see if a spore print is forming. Specimens vary in how quickly a print forms, depending on species and how mature they are. Fortunately, all you need is to be able to see the *colour* of the spores, so a faint spore print is usually enough.

There are not many colours to be had — white through to various shades of cream, pale or dark pinks, clay brown, snuff brown, rust brown, chocolate brown and black. Not much, you might think. But if you find a pure white spore print, you will have eliminated over half of the species it could be. If pink, then 90 per cent are eliminated. It is often possible to determine spore colour simply by looking at the gills, but it is unreliable since the gills themselves are likely to be different in colour from the spores, and the spore colour will only be visible on mature specimens.

Spore colours usually go with genera, so Brittlegills have white to cream spores, Field and Horse Mushrooms have almost black spores, Pinkgills have pink spores and so on. Some books provide a key, and many will use spore colour as a starting point for the gilled fungi. (There is more on keys below.)

If no immediate answer presents itself, you will need to study your specimen in minute detail and write down what you see while waiting for

that spore print. Below is a list of things to look out for, though it is a broad list, which will include characters found in species not mentioned in this book. There is more to look at than you will imagine, but it can be done in a minute or so and is not difficult.

Two natural talents are required of the forager beyond patience: a good sense of smell and good colour vision. A sensitive nose certainly helps, and an insensitive one will slow you down a little. But if you are colour-blind you suffer a more serious handicap, as fine differences of colour are often crucial to an identification. Assuming you can tell red and green apart, once you have been through the list you will know your species very well indeed. These characters, or at least the most important ones, are described for each species in this book. Working from the top of the mushroom downwards:

Cap skin: What colour is it and does it vary over the surface? Does the colour change when the skin dries out? If so, the books will say that it is ‘hygrophanous’. Is the texture dry, shiny, smooth, silky, matt, sticky, slimy, fibrous, scaly? If scaly, are the scales fixed or movable, what shape are they, and what colour? Is the skin peelable? If so, how far from the edge can it be peeled? Do young specimens have fibres radiating out from the stem to the edge of the cap? Does the skin overhang the cap?

Cap: Is it domed, like a young shop-bought mushroom, flat, conical, cylindrical, funnel-shaped and so on, and does it have a ‘boss’ in the middle or a raised bump? Is the texture crumbly when broken, or does it split radially? Is the flesh thick or thin, rubbery or papery? Does it smell of nothing, does it smell farinaceous (like raw pastry), like sweet almonds, phenolic (Elastoplasts), like geraniums, coal gas, curry, coconut or just mushroomy?

Taste: This is advanced stuff, so only taste anything wild if you are certain it is not poisonous. However, with the Brittlegills, it can help identify which Brittlegill and can always tell you if it is edible or not. The ‘not’ in this case means that it will be too peppery and will cause an upset stomach.

Gills: What colour? Are they close together or broadly spaced? Do they reach the edge of the cap, not reach it or go slightly beyond? Do they touch the stem for their full depth, part of their depth or run some way down the stem, as they do with Chanterelles and the Funnels? Do they fork (anastomose)? Are they brittle, or do they flex without breaking? Is there a white or black line on the edge? If you break the gills, do they produce a

milky latex? What colour is it and does it change colour over a period of twenty minutes?

Stem: What colour is it, and does it vary over the length? Is it short, tall, narrow, fat, fibrous, brittle, tough, wiry? Does it taper upwards or downwards, or is it cylindrical or club-shaped? Is it smooth, rough, slimy, sticky, flaky, banded? Is there a ring-like structure on the stem or a ring zone? Is the ring pendulous like a skirt or more like a collar? Is the ring ornamented in some way? If a ring zone is present, does it consist of fibres, crystals or membranous flakes? What colour is it?

Base of stem: Does it stop suddenly with a blunt end, or does it taper into a root-like structure? Are there cords radiating outwards into the leaf litter, or maybe a single cord that goes straight down? Does it have a bag-like structure at the base (a volva)? Are there any horizontal bands?

Now you know everything about your mushroom except its name. To do this you will need to look through a key, of which there are several types. The biggest one I have is *Keys to Agarics and Boleti*, by Meinhard Moser. It was published in the 1980s in English translation, under the direction of the great Roger Phillips, and consists of several hundred pages of questions and only a handful of drawings of a technical nature at the end. It is a book for grownups and a little daunting, but you always get an answer.

A typical key will begin by classifying species by spore colour and will have a section on white to cream-spored species, then brown-spored and so on, though characters other than spore colour can be a starting point. Each section will ask a series of questions such as ‘Ring on stem?’ or ‘Bag-like structure at base of stem?’, and the answer will lead you to either the species name, the genus it belongs to or another question. The simplest key is dichotomous in that there are only two answers, but there are also multiple-choice keys. An online key is provided at foragerscalendar.net.

A more simple key, which is found in some books, is in the form of a series of pictures of typical species or several species from each genus, perhaps with a small description of the genus underneath. These are quite useful and very quick. If you have such a key, then you may not need to leave your books with Margaret next door.

The whole process becomes much easier with experience, and you will soon be able to tell when something is a Brittlegill (*Russula*), a Webcap (*Cortinarius*), a Milkcap (*Lactarius*) or a Funnel (*Clitocybe*). I suggest

reading through the mushrooms within this book and familiarising yourself with them, then actively going out to search for any one of those in the list above. The confidence gained from finding a Hedgehog Mushroom and identifying it will be a great encouragement to you. Most fungi you find will not be edible, so there will be a lot to ignore. Perhaps you will come to love the fungi as much as I do and return to the interesting inedibles later, as a pastime.

One more thing is essential before you venture out. Study the poisonous species with as much dedication as you study those that are edible. You need to know what a Death Cap, a Deadly Webcap and about fifteen other species with 'deadly' in their name or nature look like before setting foot in forest or field.

There are no short-cuts to telling whether a species is edible or poisonous; old wives' tales about turning silver spoons black, being easily peeled or not, or fungi that grow on wood always being edible, are all untrue. The only way to know for sure is to know the name. I do, however, have one tip that may help.

It is much safer to pick wild mushrooms in grassland than in woodland. Woodlands contain nearly all of the truly dangerous fungi, and are worth avoiding if you are of a nervous disposition. Grassland, by contrast, produces Field Mushrooms, Horse Mushrooms, Fairy Ring Champignons, Field Blewits, Wood Blewits, Puffballs, Parasols and three edible species of Waxcap. There are few poisonous species to contend with, the most dangerous of them being the Fool's Funnel, but this is small and easily spotted. Another is the Yellow Stainer, which is often picked by mistake for Field or Horse Mushrooms. It is not deadly if you eat a plateful, but you will spend forty-eight hours regretting it. It is worth keeping away from hedges, especially if they contain oak or beech, as dangerous woodland species associated with these trees can stray into the nearby field.

A MYCOLOGICAL PRIMER

Mushrooms are not fungi — at least, they are not entire fungi. They are merely the reproductive part of a fungus, devoted solely to the task of producing and distributing billions of spores. The 'main' part is a mass of fine, generally white, fibres called hyphae, which together form a large network called a mycelium. It is the mycelium that absorbs organic

nutrients and grows, occasionally producing ‘fruiting bodies’: i.e., mushrooms, brackets and so on.

Fungi are not plants, not even a little bit. They are in their own kingdom, the Kingdom Fungi, which sits alongside Kingdom Plantae and Kingdom Animalia, along with a handful of more obscure kingdoms such as the Chromista. They have more in common with animals, if anything, as they are unable to manufacture their own primary nutrients, unlike plants. The larger fungi dealt with in this book have a variety of lifestyles — saprotrophic (living on dead organic matter), parasitic (living on live organic matter) and mycorrhizal (living in a symbiotic relationship with a plant). A parasite may turn to saprotrophy when the host dies, and a mycorrhizal fungus may well start life as a saprotroph.

Saprotrophs consist of species growing on wood or leaf litter and on the organic matter within grasslands. Mycorrhizal species are always associated with live plants via the roots. The latter’s fine mycelial fibres present a vast surface area to the soil and thus are capable of absorbing more nutrients and water than can the roots of their host plant. Specialist hyphae form a woolly sock around root hairs and partially penetrate them. Via this interface, the fungus supplies the plant with water and minerals and the plant returns the favour with sugars. The mycorrhizal fungi in this book are all hosted by trees, and thus these fungi must be sought in woodland.

Although mycorrhizal relationships are the rule rather than the exception in plants, some do not involve large fruiting bodies, such as the Penny Bun or Chanterelle. Ash, sycamore and many other tree species are not associated with large fruit bodies. The trees that do are oak, beech, birch, pine, spruce and a few others. This will inform you about where to forage for most of the best woodland species of mushroom. Woodlands consisting of trees such as ash and sycamore are not entirely without fungi, but it will be leaf litter and fungi that grow on wood (such as Oyster Mushrooms).

SEASONS

Mushrooms are not great respecters of season in the way that plants, in general, are: mushrooms appear when circumstances allow. There are a handful of species that always appear in spring, though they will simply not appear if it is a *dry* spring. September and October make up the high season and are when I take my own mushroom forays. This high season is very

susceptible to the vagaries of the weather, and autumnal species can appear as early as June if it is very wet. A dry summer will result in a poor September and, if the rain continues in its absence, a poor October too.

A very long dry summer will prevent the mycelia of the fungi from feeding, and the crop will be small. A true drought can produce the opposite effect (as in 1976), with field fungi, fearing for the future, putting all of their energies into reproduction, filling fields with thousands of mushrooms. This is known as ‘stress fruiting’. An autumn when it never stops raining may start well, but the fungi do not like it too wet and soon give up. There seems to be no pleasing them, but most years produce more than enough for the average forager: it is just a matter of when.

A NOTE ON BRITTLEGILLS

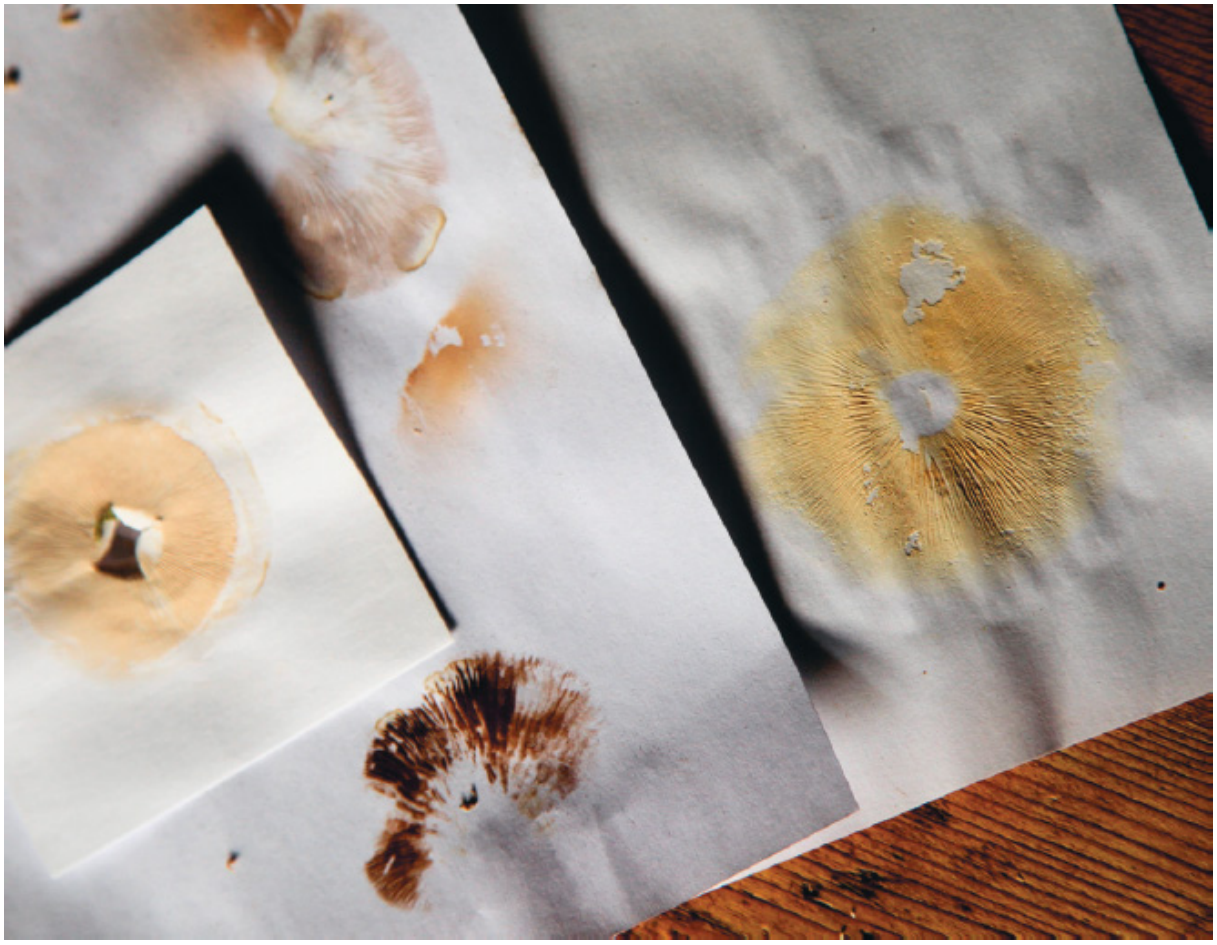
Brittlegills (*Russula* spp.) are among the best-represented species of fungi in woodland. They are medium-sized species, as wide as they are tall, with caps that can be red, purple, green, yellow or white, stems that look like a stick of chalk and gills and flesh that is brittle — not fibrous or rubbery, as in most mushrooms.

There are perhaps a hundred species, a great tax on the patience of mushroom hunters attempting to identify them. Some are very straightforward — a scarlet-capped species in a beech wood will invariably be the Beechwood Sickener, and a green-capped species on which the skin of the cap is crazed will always be the Greencracked Brittlegill. Most, however, require hours of study and a microscope to identify.

For the forager there is a quick path through all of this. If you are *sure* it is a Brittlegill, then all you need to do is nibble a small piece from the edge of the cap and chew with your front teeth. If it is very peppery (something that can take up to a minute) or bitter or if you just do not like it, then spit it out in a delicate manner and leave the mushroom in the forest. This *only* works with Brittlegills — using it as a general technique will have you eating Death Caps and Funeral Bells. It is also a principle that should be restricted to north-western Europe, as there may be *Russula* species in foreign parts to which it does not apply.

With this in mind, I have included only a few of the edible Brittlegills in this book, though many more are very good to eat. There are several red

and purple species which just don’t get a mention, but they don’t really need one as the above test is all you require.



Spore prints

SEAWEEDS

Seaweeds form what taxonomists call a ‘polyphyletic group’, which means that they are often treated as being related to each other, even though they are not. Another way of looking at it is that they form an ecological group — species that have vaguely similar structures and lifestyles, growing in the same habitat. In fact, they fall into three informal and very distantly related groups: the Rhodophyta (red seaweeds), Phaeophyta (brown seaweeds) and Chlorophyta (green seaweeds).

Despite the benign influence of Far Eastern cultures, for which seaweeds are almost a staple part of the diet, the British are not great lovers of anything that comes from the sea that isn’t a fish. This is a great pity. The foraging of seaweed is an even more minor sport than eating it, and this is sad too. Seaweeds have been gathered and eaten by many peoples, but none is more enthusiastic than those from East Asia. I have taken people from Singapore and the Philippines on forays who have in their pockets little packets of sweetened nori (the stuff wrapped around sushi), which they eat in place of the traditional Mars bar carried by the British. Guess which one is better for you.

There is a small tradition of seaweed-eating in the UK, mostly from the Celtic ‘fringes’. In Northern Ireland, Dulse (or Dillisk) is popular as a traditional dried snack. Scotland, too, has a small tradition of seaweed consumption, but it is Wales and North Devon that are most famous for it, in the form of Laver.

Even if you think you have never eaten seaweed outside of a sushi bar, it is likely that you have, as it is an ingredient in many processed foods. Carragheen is used to make a thickening agent for use in such delights as milkshakes, and alginates are extracted from some of the wracks (the brown seaweeds that can cover the upper, rocky shore).

I practise what I preach on the matter of seaweeds, and very few of my dinners are completely seaweed-free. For the most part I add dried, powdered seaweeds to dishes as one would add a stock cube or a spice — in small quantities. But when I can, I use fresh seaweed to make a Welsh breakfast (laverbread cakes), seaweed pudding (using Carragheen), deep-

fried Dulse, Dulse rosti or seaweed, Sea Beet and smoked haddock tart. I love mushrooms, and very much enjoy a dish of Wood Blewits with cream or a fried Horse Mushroom, but if I became allergic to fungi, I would be merely saddened, not heartbroken, as I would be if the same thing happened with seaweed.

Seaweeds are first-class foods, rather than an occasional walk on the wild side, and extremely good for you. They contain high levels of minerals and vitamins and have an excellent amino acid profile. They also have the ability to satiate — that is, they fill you up and thus act as an excellent diet food, should you need one. One recent attendee at a seashore foray wrote to thank me for the day and asked if there had been anything we had eaten that suppressed the appetite as he had not been hungry for the next twenty-four hours! Their taste is good, once acquired, and if they are cooked properly. The dishes I mention above are superb, and some seaweeds even make a good pickle. But if they are used as an addition to other foods, the glutamates they contain will act as a flavour-enhancer and the flavour of the seaweed itself is immaterial. This can be done using seaweed as one would use a bay leaf, disposing of it after cooking, or by adding it dried and powdered.

Collecting your own seaweed is the most enjoyable way of acquiring it, as it is fresh and the satisfaction of finding it will accompany the subsequent meal. Foraging for seaweed is easy and anxiety-free, since there are none that are poisonous, just a large number that are too tough, too slimy, too bitter or too small, or that simply don’t taste very nice. There is one genus, *Desmarestia*, with three species in British waters, which contains a ridiculously high concentration of sulphuric acid, presumably to deter grazing. It is made up of branching filaments and looks like nothing edible. If ever you find yourself nibbling on a piece of seaweed that tastes of sulphuric acid, stop eating it.

I always take a bag for each species I expect to find. This is the voice of experience shouting at you, as I have lost count of the number of hours I have wasted separating Dulse from Carragheen and both from Gutweed. Net bags are the best, like the type that onions and kindling come in.

Rocky shores in spring and summer are the best place and time to forage for seaweeds, though if you have a sheltered coast or a big tide in your area, then you will always find edible seaweeds at low water in the colder

months. Always start your forage on an ebbing tide, about an hour before low water, to give yourself plenty of time. Spring (big) tides, which come around every two weeks, are the best. Do be sensible and check both tide and the coastal forecast (which is always more extreme than the standard inland forecast) before setting out.

When collecting seaweed, good foraging manners are required as it is possible to strip an area clear of some of the more delicate species, such as Laver. Always use scissors and, with the larger species such as Dulse and kelps, leave more of any specimen than you take. Laver can be cut just above the holdfast, provided you are not intent on removing more than a few specimens from the beach, and Gutweed can be collected in vast quantities, should you so wish, without any concern.

Avoid any seaweeds on which other seaweeds or invertebrates such as bryozoans have made a home. The latter can completely cover a seaweed frond in tiny, diamond-shaped ‘tiles’. The above advice will ensure that you do not damage any local populations, but also means that nearly all of what you take home is already prepared for use.

Seaweeds do not keep very long when fresh, so if you cannot use or deal with them immediately, place your collection in the fridge in a plastic bag, and leave it unwashed. Even then you may have only twenty-four hours. They do keep very well dried, or dried and powdered. Laver is always used cooked, and I keep small packets of cooked Laver in the freezer. All seaweeds need serious washing to remove excess salt, sand, grit, crabs, winkles and shrimps. A quick rinse will have you eating all of the above.

Place your batch of seaweed in a bucket of water and swirl it round. Leave it for a minute or two to float to the top, while the sand sinks to the bottom, then lift it out by hand, or with a spaghetti spoon if it is Gutweed or Laver. Pour the water, less the sand, into another bucket and repeat up to six times, the last rinse being in fresh water. Drain, then if you want it drier still, place in a salad spinner then dry with towels. The ‘six times rinse’ is only needed for intractable weeds such as Gutweed; three or four is enough for the others.

INVERTEBRATES

Eating wild invertebrates such as ants, grasshoppers and garden snails is quite fashionable — in principle, if not in practice. The very few I have included in this book are fairly accessible, so you will have the chance to say that you did at least try. Other cultures eat insects as a matter of course, and Far Eastern and African marketplaces have stalls selling unnamed creatures that most Britons would rather see in a horror film than on a plate.

Insect populations are believed to have declined dramatically, at least in Europe, and this is not simply a further decline in already uncommon species but a decline in overall insect biomass. These are wild populations of insects, and the wholesale collecting of wild insects for food is not to be countenanced. Farming insects, however, is a great idea, and often employs waste organic matter from processes such as beer-making.

While we could never feed the world with wild insects, collecting a few for interest and culinary experimentation will do little or no damage. I like to experiment, and have tried quite a number of species now, only a few of which were remotely pleasant, with grasshoppers being the best. But take my advice and never look too closely at any wild invertebrate you are about to eat, and never attempt to eat a slug.

JANUARY

And so the forager's year begins. January is a month when nature rests and waits, but it would need to be a very cold month for a wild food foray to find nothing. Three-Cornered Leek is already visible and collectable, Hairy Bittercress can be found in odd corners everywhere, small quantities of Sea Beet can be found on southern shores and Garlic Mustard is ready for the off with a display of its basal leaves. But only three species fit my criteria for an entry in a particular month, that being the first time something can be reliably found in good condition. Only one of these, the Velvet Shank, is a true January specialist.

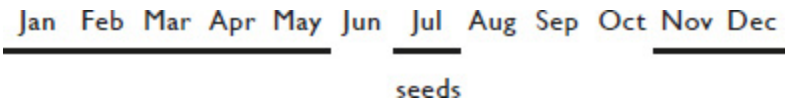
Black Mustard
Velvet Shank
Wood Ear

Also found

Alexanders
Bittercresses
Common Sorrel
Dandelion (roots)
Garlic Mustard
Oak Moss
Sea Beet
Three-Cornered Leek (and Few-Flowered Leek)
Winter Laver

Black Mustard *Brassica nigra*

BRASSICACEAE



The leaves of the sadly unregarded Black Mustard are a shock to the uninitiated — a fact I exploit for my own amusement when we come across some on my wild food forays. I hand a leaf to each person present, then tell them all to start chewing. The mild, nutty flavour lasts for about five seconds, to be replaced by a pepperiness which reaches furnace intensity after twenty more. Some hate it, some love it. I consider it to be a superb wild food, as the heat is complemented by underlying and pleasantly complex flavours. Be warned though: an over-ambitious mouthful will have you hopping around.

The heat of Black Mustard, and of many other members of the cabbage family, such as Rocket, is ‘designed’ to be unpleasant in order to deter the attentions of animals. Oddly, the chemical responsible, allyl isothiocyanate, does not exist within the leaves but is created by hydrolysis of a precursor chemical when the leaves are chewed. This explains the slight delay before the pepperiness becomes evident.

The plant will grow to 2 metres, though in January it will be much shorter. The lower leaves are lobed with sharply serrated edges. Most leaves are prickly; the flower is bright yellow. It is a plant of lowlands, mostly southern, and rare north of Leeds. It can be found inland, but has a strong preference for coastal areas. It is usually found in large numbers in any one location, sometimes in its thousands, covering large areas of waste ground,

its preferred habitat. Despite being strictly an annual plant, the same location can produce plants year after year.

Black Mustard's fondness for waste ground and odd corners raises a problem for the forager. Most cabbage species are masters at extracting minerals from the soil, and Black Mustard is no exception. Many areas of waste, notably in urban areas, are contaminated with toxic elements, many of which will be incorporated into Black Mustard plants. The plant is even employed to clean up toxic areas of land, a process called 'phytoremediation'. So choose your foraging spots with great care. Assuming you avoid unpleasant toxins, Black Mustard is very good for you, with all the benefits so well known in the brassicas. The peppery component shows evidence of being protective against bladder tumours.

The prickliness of the leaves is not to everyone's taste, but the bright green new growth in the centre of the plant is a little softer to the palate — and just as peppery. It is one of the best salad plants, and makes a good pesto too. Cooked, it becomes bitter rather than peppery. However, if cooked inside a dumpling, it retains some of its kick. These are the best dumplings for a beef stew. The leaves gradually become less substantial and less palatable by the summer as the flowers and seeds are formed. The seeds are, of course, edible and appear in July and August. It is worth collecting entire fruiting spikes while the pods are still slightly immature and ripening them at home. Any attempt to gather the mature seeds directly will have them scattered on the ground, though a butterfly net will help.

Velvet Shank *Flammulina velutipes*

PHYSAL ACRIACEAE • SPORES WHITE

This is the very best of the few mushrooms that regularly make an appearance in the depths of winter. Large, dense tiers appear on rotting tree stumps, brightly glistening and golden. They are unmistakable from this alone, though the white spores and black velvety stems of mature specimens make identification certain. The Latin name is appropriate and wonderfully descriptive: 'little flame with a black foot'.

The Velvet Shank is a very common fungus, growing on various deciduous trees, notably dead elm, ash and the many hedgerow elms that escape Dutch elm disease until their size makes them vulnerable.

I thought this species was immune from mis-identification until I found a species called *Gymnopilus penetrans*, commonly found in the autumn, growing in January. It produces rust-coloured spores which discolour the gills except in young specimens. It is described as being ‘probably poisonous’, which is poisonous enough for me. There are a handful of other probably poisonous species that look moderately similar, but they are rare in January and will not have white spores.

The flavour of the Velvet Shank is pleasant and mild, but what of the slime that covers the cap to the point of dripping off the edge in wet weather? It is possible to wash or wipe it off, and if fried, the slime almost disappears. And there is something to be said for embracing it as a thickening agent in soups and sauces.

Almost unbelievably, the dense white tufts of fungi with elongated stems seen in specialist shops and known as *enoki take* are exactly the same species but grown in captivity, in the dark.

Wood Ear *Auricularia auricula-judae*

AURICULARIACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The Wood Ear, Jelly Ear or Jew's Ear, as it is variously known, is common all year round. But it is in the winter months, notably January, that it is most abundant and at its best. The last of these three names is all down to the unlikely legend that Judas Iscariot hanged himself on an Elder tree (the fungus's preferred habitat). I prefer to stick with Wood Ear, even though the regrettable association is immovably recorded in the Latin name. 'Ear' is certainly appropriate, as it can look startlingly like an ear.

Wood Ears are brown, shiny on the inside and more matt and paler on the outside. The texture is soft and rubbery. You will find Wood Ears growing on the dead trunks and branches of Elder trees around 70 per cent of the time. It is occasionally found on other host trees. Both Elder and Wood Ear are extremely common throughout lowland Britain, so it is a species that may be collected without the slightest concern for conservation. Even dry specimens may be collected. Placed in fresh water for ten minutes, they will reconstitute completely and perfectly.

There is a group of inedible fungi that also look like ears, though not quite so convincingly. These are the *Peziza* species, a group of cup fungi that are often brown. Their texture is rubbery but also crumbly, lacking the elastic quality of the Wood Ear. I have never seen one on an Elder, and most of them grow on soil, so they are easily avoided.

The unusual flavour and rubbery texture of Wood Ears are not always welcome to the Western palate. In the Far East, however, a very close relative, *Auricularia polytricha*, is highly prized, to the point that it is cultivated on a massive scale. It is likely to be this species that you find floating around in a Chinese soup. Wood Ear is really a texture food, and in this it excels, its crunchy/rubbery constitution surviving any amount of cooking. Soup aside, a stir-fry is the obvious place for Wood Ears, though

you must add them after at least some of the other ingredients, as they can explode dangerously in hot fat.

Although their flavour is mild, it is very easily strengthened and modified. Wash your fresh Wood Ears, snipping off bits that you do not much like the look of, then dry them until they are completely shrivelled. They will keep indefinitely if stored in a dry place. When you come to use them, reconstitute with a vegetable or, better still, mushroom stock. Despite appearances, Wood Ears contain a substantial amount of carbohydrates, at 65 per cent dry weight.

FEBRUARY

In some ways February is January, only worse. It is often our coldest month, with frosty or boggy conditions, and few foraging activities are not confounded by 30 cm of snow. Nevertheless, no month is completely devoid of forageables. Black Mustard is now even better than in January, and February even has two winter specialists: Scarlet Elf-Cup and Winter Laver. The former of these is more affectation than food, though a very pretty one, but Winter Laver is a great joy to the seaweed enthusiast as it is the best of the Lavers, though a little tricky to collect.

Bittercresses
Scarlet Elf-Cup
Three-Cornered Leek
(and Few-Flowered Leek)
Winter Laver

Also found

Alexanders
Black Mustard
Common Sorrel
Cowslip and Primrose
Dandelion (roots)
Garlic Mustard
Oak Moss
Pignut (just about visible now)
Sea Beet
Velvet Shank
Wild Garlic
Wood Ear

Hairy Bittercress *Cardamine hirsuta* and allies

BRASSICACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

There are several Bittercresses worth eating, Hairy Bittercress being the most familiar, with Wavy Bittercress, *C. flexuosa*, a close second and Large Bittercress, *C. amara*, bringing up the rear. There is very little to tell them apart beyond Hairy Bittercress being the smallest and the most often seen. They all have basal leaves radiating outwards, with vaguely disc-shaped leaflets arranged opposite one another along the leaf stem and one, larger, terminal leaf. They produce small white four-petalled flowers and upright seed pods, which explode their seeds when mature.

Hairy and Wavy Bittercresses are notorious weeds. They infest gardens, borders and planters, and can be seen growing in the gaps in the pavement, the bottom of walls and under street trees, where only the brave or foolhardy would collect anything. Tons of them must be uprooted every year by gardeners at their wits' end; if only they knew how good it is to eat, they would perform this duty with better grace.

Large Bittercress seldom finds its way into gardens but is common in woodlands, especially along damp and muddy footpaths. There is little point in attempting to identify precisely which species you have before you — if it looks and tastes like a Bittercress, that is good enough.

The flavour of them all is nutty, followed by peppery, when the chemicals that supply the heat are formed in the mouth.

All above-ground parts of the Bittercresses are edible, so I usually uproot them completely, then cut off the muddy roots with scissors. Whatever you do with those shop-bought tubs of growing cress you can do with the Bittercresses.

Scarlet Elf-Cup *Sarcoscypha austriaca*

SARCOSCYPHACEAE

Jan **Feb** Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The brilliant red of this pretty fungus would be striking at any time of year, but against the drab tones of February it is almost shocking. ‘Moss Rose’, one of its colloquial names, is equally appropriate for such a beauty. Our

village baker, Norman, told me that seventy years ago he and his friends would collect both it and snowdrops to make a posy for their mothers, the white and red representing respectively the purity and passion of Christ.

It is certainly unmistakable. The cups grow from a buried stem. They are bright scarlet internally, scurfy and silver/white externally, and always grow terrestrially in damp deciduous woodland.

The Scarlet Elf-Cup is not a fungus that anyone would wish to collect by the kilo, as it is too attractive to unearth more than a handful and the flavour can only be described as mild with just a hint of the floral. What it does bring to a dish is a bright splash of colour. It is best left uncooked, sliced or whole in a salad, or with a small squeeze of early wild garlic pesto placed in the bottom of the cup.

Three-Cornered Leek *Allium triquetrum*
and
Few-Flowered Leek *Allium paradoxum*
ALLIOIDEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Three-Cornered Leek is common to the point of being a nuisance wherever it grows. It is restricted in its range to southern and parts of western England, and long may it so remain, despite being a foraging favourite. Elsewhere it is coastal, though largely absent in Scotland. As with most invasive species, it finds a foothold in odd corners and disturbed ground. The leaves are much more slender than the broad, lanceolate leaves of Wild Garlic and not so garlicky in flavour, but neither are they so mild as the cultivated leek. The leaves arise from a distinctly leek-shaped ‘stem’, which in turn grows from a distinct bulb. The whole plant is similar in appearance to a bluebell, except that the flowers are white with a green vein running down the centre of each petal.

The stem will win no prizes at a vegetable show as it is barely the thickness of a pencil. This is partly compensated for by there being so very many of them in any location. All parts are edible, including flowers that grow on stems which are triangular in cross-section — hence the name. Like cultivated leeks, Three-Cornered Leek is rather stringy in texture and needs to be chopped into short lengths before cooking. It can be used as a direct substitute for cultivated leek in recipes that do not require the latter’s size. But bear in mind that the flavour is more of onion than of leeks.

Few-Flowered Leek is also unwelcome to all but the forager, but less common and found in isolated, mostly urban, locations throughout Britain. Again it is all but impossible to eradicate once established, and Leeds, Edinburgh, Cambridge and parts of West Sussex have large and troublesome populations. It is very similar to Three-Cornered Leek, except that it has, er, fewer flowers and only one leaf per plant, compared with two or three on the much more substantial Three-Cornered Leek. Those flowers it does have radiate out from the top of the stem, which will also sport a number of edible bulbils.

Although I have placed these plants in February, they are available and edible from December until late April, when they will have formed quite a large bulb, big enough to pickle. I have selected February as the best month

because that is when the ‘stem’ is at its fattest and longest, and the flower spike is yet to appear.

Winter Laver *Porphyra linearis*

RHODOPHYTA

Winter Laver is, as the colloquial name suggests, a determinedly winter seaweed, appearing in December and fading by late March.

Despite having an instinct for what I might find in any particular place or season, Winter Laver always surprises me. A walk along a rocky shore in February may seem to find little, but suddenly a rock will appear, covered in the glistening, narrow fronds of this particularly tasty seaweed.

It grows very high up on the shore, frequently above the high-water mark, relying on sea spray to keep it wet and fed. The fronds cling to large rocks and frequently the sea wall, and are the very devil to collect. The best way is to use a dinner fork, which you slide under the fronds and then wind like spaghetti. Even this sly technique will sometimes dislodge tiny pieces of rock to which the seaweed adheres, so you may need to spend a little time removing them from your collection. It is possible to do so after cooking, putting your hands into the sticky mess that is cooked Laver, and feeling for anything gritty.

As Lavers go, Winter Laver is fast food, taking only five hours to cook; other, more robust Laver species, take a heroic ten hours. It is also the tastiest. See p. 144 to find out more about Lavers.

MARCH

There are stirrings in the undergrowth, and hope rises in the heart of the forager. Indeed, many of the best foraging plants are first at their best in March. Alexanders have begun to produce the long, succulent but not yet fibrous side-shoots, Stinging Nettles form low carpets of new leaves, Sea Kale gives us its first offering – the forced leaf shoots – and in the middle of the month it is time to tap Birch trees for their sap.

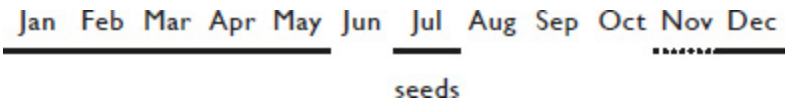
Alexanders
Common Sorrel
Corn Salad
Cow Parsley
Dandelion (leaves)
Primrose and Cowslip
Rock Samphire
Sea Kale (new shoots)
Silver Birch
Stinging Nettle
Wild Garlic

Also found

Bittercresses
Black Mustard
Bulrush (for the roots and, late in the month, the young shoots may just appear)
Chickweed
Garlic Mustard
Oak Moss
Pignut
Scurvygrass
Sea Beet
Three-Cornered Leek (and Few-Flowered Leek)
Wild Onion
Winter Laver
Wood Ear
Wood Sorrel

Alexanders *Smyrnium olusatrum*

APIACEAE



Alexanders – loved by some, hated by others, unknown to most – is a plant with which I am very familiar; however, I sit firmly on the fence between the lovers and haters. It is an abundant plant wherever it manages to establish itself, but, while all parts are edible, it is not the easiest plant to use in the kitchen.

Though not truly a maritime plant, it prefers the relatively temperate refuge of coastal roadsides. Here it can completely take over from Cow Parsley. It is common south from Liverpool round to The Wash, with scattered populations elsewhere. In Scotland it is found in quantity only in the Firth of Forth. Wherever you find it, there are no environmental concerns about picking this plant as it is a non-native, having been brought here by the Romans as a winter feed for their horses.

Alexanders is unusual in that it starts growing its lush leaves just when most other plants have battened down their winter hatches. The leaves first appear in late October and are gone by June. It is a biennial, the smaller, first-year plants building a substantial and nutrient-rich taproot which is expended in the large, second-year plant to produce flower and seed.

As with all members of the carrot family, a great deal of care is needed as there are several in this family which are deadly poisonous. Hemlock Water-Dropwort is the most likely plant to cause confusion because it follows a similar winter timetable to Alexanders. The leaflets of Alexanders are large and shallowly incised, while those of Hemlock Water-Dropwort are smaller and deeply incised. The latter plant is a deep green, while Alexanders is a brighter, slightly yellow green. The smell of the sap is different too: aromatic and pleasant in Alexanders, acrid and unpleasant in Hemlock Water-Dropwort. Hemlock (a different plant from Hemlock Water-Dropwort) is also deadly, but has tell-tale red dots on its stem.

The first time I tried Alexanders, I was overwhelmed by the intensity of its flavour. Powerfully aromatic, it reminded me of those horrible bits of candied angelica my mother used to put on her cakes. The taste of the fresh plant is too much for some, though is quickly reduced in potency during cooking.

But what can be done with it? It was once a favoured plant of the vegetable garden, its position eventually usurped by the considerably less forbidding celery. Like celery, all parts – leaf, stem and root – are edible. The young leaves can be used in a salad (not too much!) and were once cooked as a plain vegetable. I steam them until they soften, by which time

their pungency has been reduced to palatable levels. I suggest chopping the cooked leaves and stirring them in a pasta dish or a curry.

As an aperitif you could try Gin Alexanders. Pack some leaves into a large jar and top up with vodka. Leave for three weeks and strain off into a bottle. I suggest that a little bit of sugar be added. Without the sugar, the result is remarkably like gin, and if you told someone that it was a gin from an artisan distiller in Brize Norton, they would believe you.

The stem is the most commonly eaten part, but it is essential to pick it at just the right moment. This is usually in early March, when long side-stems appear. These are solid throughout and only worth picking when they are still growing and, crucially, very flexible. Pick them later and you might as well try to eat bamboo canes. Now comes the other downside – the stringy fibres on the outside need to be peeled away. You just have to be patient and work with short lengths only. Six minutes' steaming will have your stems succulent. Serve with butter and black pepper. You can also candy the peeled stems.

Also in March, the flower heads form, nestled within a fibrous membrane at the base of a leaf stem. The tough membrane should be removed and the flower buds steamed, or battered and fried, or used in a slightly challenging salad.

I have left the best until last. The large, dark brown taproot is a close analogue of the parsnip, albeit a parsnip that has spent its life in the perfume department of Boots. They are best dug in January, before their energy has been expended in producing the second-year growth and they become woody. These roots can be every bit as large as a parsnip, and they are sweet and aromatic. Roasted, pan-fried in butter or steamed, they are one of the best and most energy-rich wild foods available. Do read, however, my comments on digging up roots on pp. 25 and 26.

Common Sorrel *Rumex acetosa*

POLYGONACEAE

Common Sorrel is one of our commonest plants and found from the Shetlands to the Scilly Isles. It is a plant of pasture and grasslands in

general, but they need to be well-established habitats, not a short ley. The plant is available all year, except in high summer, when the leaves mostly disappear and the tall, pink then rust-red flower spike rises. From September to spring it forms a basal rosette of leaves, and it is these that are collected.

There is a rather ridiculous but nevertheless serious problem with identification. The leaves are spear-shaped, with two backward-pointing lobes. The lobes are sharply pointed. Another plant with similarly shaped leaves (though they are only this shape when young) is the poisonous Lords and Ladies. The treacherous leaves of this plant are only young in late winter and early spring, so in summer and autumn there is never a cause for confusion. Nevertheless, before picking Sorrel, it is important to read the section on Lords and Ladies on p. 364.

The leaves of Common Sorrel vary in size enormously, from 3 to 25 cm long. The flavour is acidic, like grape skins, and a small nibble on a leaf is an easy double-check if you are unsure. The older leaves have a milder acidic flavour.

Sorrel can be employed wherever a certain amount of acidity is required. A sauce for fish is the best-known use, salad is another, but there is room for endless experimentation. Oxalic acid, a chemical I used in my furniture-making days to bleach wood, is what gives Common Sorrel its flavour. Although oxalic acid is poisonous, it would require you to eat a builder's bucketful of the plant to cause any problems.

Corn Salad *Valerianella* spp.

CAPRIFOLIACEAE

Corn Salad, also known as Lamb's Lettuce, is one of those plants that seem attractive when you are perusing the seed catalogues. In fact, I don't recall giving this one a try during my allotment days, though I was a sucker for unusual plants. It is grown to provide a winter or early spring salad. *Medicina Britannica* of 1746 gives the plant a brief mention: 'Lamb's Lettuce cools and moistens, is a little laxative, is somewhat of the Nature of Lettuce, and used for it in the Spring.'

There are two fairly common species of Corn Salad, both weeds of walls, roadsides, flowerbeds and other bare ground. The name Corn Salad reflects its weedy nature, as it was often found among the corn in wheat fields when there was anything to find in wheat fields other than wheat. It occurs throughout most of southern Britain and largely coastal in the north.

The flavour of the leaves is pleasant and nutty, and it is usually collected when young. However, the flavour is remarkably perfumed when the plant is in bloom with its truly tiny lilac flowers. These flowers make it an easy plant to identify – they form in 'umbel-like' clusters (cymes). The florets are only 1.5 mm across, forming five-pointed stars. The leaves are elongated oval in shape and in opposite pairs.

Cow Parsley *Anthriscus sylvestris*

APIACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The roadsides of spring fizz brightly with this common plant. In fact, it is all too common, boorishly out-competing many of the more delicate plants that should be found on roadsides and under hedges. It is the first plant to flower in a series of lookalikes, being followed by rough Chervil and then Hedge Parsley. All are edible but none, despite their encouraging names, very much. In all of them the leaves are tough and the taste poor. Cow Parsley, the largest of the three, gets a mention for March because of its young stems. Not every plant will produce a suitable stem, but if you see one a centimetre or so in diameter and a few centimetres high, it is well worth picking. The fibrous outside is peeled back to reveal a succulent centre, which has an intense favour of parsley. It is good in a salad, but for most foragers it is an on-the-hoof snack.

Cow Parsley is very common throughout Britain. It is easily found because of its habit of taking over roadsides, but you must be careful to avoid other members of the carrot family such as Hemlock and Hemlock Water-Dropwort. Cow Parsley has green and red stems and fern-like leaves, and the whole plant is furry, unlike its dangerous cousins.

Dandelion *Taraxacum* spp.

ASTERACEAE

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
roots		leaves		flowers					roots		

The Dandelion, although an exquisitely beautiful plant, both individually and en masse, is invariably considered a weed by all but a handful of specialists, and anyone with a lawn or flowerbed will spend time and fortune attempting to eradicate it. Yet it does have its uses.

All parts of the plant can be used in the kitchen, except the ‘clocks’ and the flower stem. The plant bides its time with a small, basal rosette during the winter. But with spring the fresh young leaves will shoot upwards. If

you have never tried these, then you really must, just for the experience. Even though they are at their best, they are extremely bitter. Bitterness is a seldom appreciated flavour to the modern palate, but a few of these leaves in a salad will add to the overall complexity.

Fortunately there is a fix for the bitterness problem: forcing. Put a black bucket or flowerpot, with the hole covered, upside down on your best patch of Dandelions, just when the spring growth starts. After three weeks the leaves will be long, thin, pale and much sweeter. You will also have an infestation of woodlice, but it is effectively gardening I am talking about here, so naturally something has to go wrong. By the way, if you are thinking of making the best of another gardening disaster by eating the woodlice, don't. I tried them once. They have the texture of broken microscope cover slips and no flavour at all.

Brilliant yellow flowers are the Dandelion's next offering. The traditional date to pick them is St George's Day, 23 April, but they can be around for some time before and after. In fact, they can be used while still in bud to make a type of wild 'caper'. Pick the buds, trimming them as you go, and pickle them, perhaps using the Blackberry vinegar you made last year (see p. 220). The flavour is good, but the 'ball of wet blotting-paper' texture is not to everyone's taste.

Do not leave it too long to pick the flowers, for when they are over they are over everywhere and surprisingly suddenly. They need to be gathered in the morning, preferably in sunshine, and dealt with immediately you arrive home. The flowers take a late afternoon nap, followed immediately by a full night's sleep by closing up, even after they have been picked. Use scissors to snip off the petals into a bowl. These are the basis of one of the best country wines. This may not be saying very much, but it is pleasantly drinkable and a good dessert wine if you get the sugar levels right. Or you can make a Dandelion syrup by layering the petals in a tall jug, alternating with layers of castor sugar. Leave for four days, then pour in boiling water. Pour the whole lot in a saucepan, heat and stir until the sugar has dissolved, then sieve the syrup into jars. The flavour is agreeably bitter and has a flavour of barley sugar. Dandelion petals can also be used in an alcoholic infusion – either straight or with sugar to make a syrupy liqueur. I suggest brandy as the base, but the colour is a purer yellow with vodka.

Finally, there are the roots. These are usually a by-product of a Sisyphean attempt to rid the lawn of weeds, but they can be uprooted at any

time, though autumn and winter are best. The roots are as bitter as the leaves, but they do make a good coffee substitute. Honestly. I have tried it, and while it is not up there with the best Colombian blend, it is easily good enough for a latte. Scrub, slice up the bigger roots, dry on a windowsill or in a low oven. When dry, bake for 25 minutes at 200° C – or, at least, until you see smoke. But not flames. Cool, then gently grind the roots and use this to make that latte.

Primrose *Primula vulgaris*
and
Cowslip *Primula veris*
PRIMULACEAE

The Primrose is familiar to all with its lovely spring display. It is a common plant of deciduous woodland but has also found a welcome home in the garden, though often in garish varietal form. Cowslips are less well known, being plants of permanent grassland, a habitat that has been depleted by the plough. It has, however, made a comeback on the new grassland habitat that is the roadside bank. Here it is planted enthusiastically by highway authorities keen to make these structures more attractive.

Neither plant finds much use in the kitchen, but they are great decorations on a spring salad. One of my favourite uses for Primroses is to float them on a fruit jelly. Of course, there is one thing for which Cowslips are especially known and that is in the famous country wine. It is an unlikely wine but traditional and good – for a country wine. Unfortunately it requires a gallon of flowers for each gallon of wine, so it is not something to be taken on unless there are blossoms everywhere that can be picked without upsetting people who are simply pleased to see then. They are easily replaced by or combined with Primroses.

Using flowers as a salad decoration is very common, but do remember that not all flowers are edible and some are poisonous, so it’s best to stick to picking the ones mentioned in this book.

Rock Samphire *Crithmum maritimum*

APIACEAE

I have tried to like this stuff, but with no success. I try a tiny bit every year, hoping that, as with avocado, I have finally got the taste. Indeed, I know few people who do like it, everyone spitting it out and suffering its lingering flavour for hours afterwards. It is odd, then, that it was once so highly prized that the nineteenth century saw the now much preferred Marsh Samphire rejected with anger as a low adulterant. It is an attractive plant, with succulent, narrow, branching, pale green leaves and umbels of yellow flowers from late spring. Individual sprigs look great on any dish, and the texture is good.

But all this is ruined by a flavour that is undeniably half way between carrots and white spirit. Fortunately, the white spirit component is much less noticeable in immature plants, becoming progressively stronger as the year proceeds, and hence my inclusion of Rock Samphire in March. The traditional use for it was as a pickle. I have made it myself, consumed jars made by top chefs and bought some ready-made from shops, all of it horrible.

Why, then, do I mention it? Well, it is, as noted, very common, and not quite everyone hates it. With no one picking it any more, there is plenty of it clinging to cliffs, sprouting from pebble beaches and growing out of the cracks in the promenade. Better still, last year I had something of a revelation at Southampton airport. There was a very nice man in the duty-free area who was selling his Isle of Wight gin. Liking gin and liking those who make it even more, I spoke to him, and he told me that one of its ingredients was Rock Samphire. I took up his offer of a taste and found it to be excellent, especially the fourth glass. At last, a noble use for this faded star of the vegetable firmament.

Sea Kale *Crambe maritima*

BRASSICACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

shoots/leaves/brocc/flowers/pods

Sea Kale is my favourite plant, not because it is good to eat but because it looks so unlikely. A monstrous cabbage, incongruously sitting on a pebble beach, a single plant may be 1.5 m wide and tall, and it grows anew every year from deep and robust roots. The first time I saw one I was left awestruck. Sometimes they grow in their thousands. Sea Kale is not considered to be threatened, but it is common only in its fairly restricted

habitat, so some care must be exercised when collecting any part. It most certainly must not be dug up for the roots.

Sea Kale is a strictly maritime plant, found on pebble and gravel beaches in many parts of Britain. There is almost nothing to see in February, save a few flower spikes from last season, but it is in February that you must make your preparations for the first of its edible components, the forced and blanched leaf shoots that are ready to cut in March.

You need to know where a plant will appear. This is often given away by those spikes, provided a storm has not blown such indicators away. Gently scrape back the pebbles to reveal the roots, and possibly some very young shoots, then replace and add to them, forming a broad mound about 20 cm high. Remember, using notes, photographs or triangulation, precisely where your mounds are. It would be nice to place a small flag on each mound, but this merely invites inspection by the unscrupulous and probable loss of your prize. I have taken to making decoy mounds to dishearten the opposition.

A month or so later, go back, gently excavate your mounds and you should find blanched, forced Sea Kale shoots. Do not collect every single shoot as it is best to leave some to grow – though it is unlikely that taking the lot would do irreparable damage. These sweet, succulent treasures are one of the best wild foods and edible raw. If you wish to cook them, they should be sweated for seconds rather than minutes.

Leaves that have not fallen to your knife and which have been allowed to develop normally are edible, if a little bitter when no more than 15 cm long, but in maturity they are edible only if you possess the teeth of a horse and a digestion to match. Young leaves will continue to be produced up until August. Then there are the immature flower spikes, which first appear in May. These are effectively ‘broccoli’, and each plant will produce many heads. They are extremely good to eat and another of my favourite wild foods. Since they are the reproductive parts of this perennial plant, they should be collected only occasionally, taking only one or two from each plant.

By June the flowers will have formed: abundant, white with a yellow centre, four-petalled, sweet and with a pleasant hint of cabbage. As with most edible flowers, they are used as an edible garnish for just about anything (though the flavour of cabbage is seldom welcome in a dessert). Those flowers that escape the salad decorator's hand will turn into seed pods. Unlike most cabbages, which produce long peapod-like structures, Sea Kale contents itself with a single seed in each round pod. These pods are the size of a large pea and, before the seed hardens, edible. Although their crunchiness and flavour are good, they make a confusing impression in a dish, looking like a pea but tasting of cabbage. Look out for these during July.

Sea Kale can easily be grown in the garden, although you will need plenty of space. Nineteenth-century gardeners were particularly fond of the plant, and Sea Kale chimneys were available to force the spring shoots.

Silver Birch *Betula pendula*

BETULACEAE

Few of nature's bounties are as reliably seasonal as Birch sap. At some time around the middle of March the sap rises and is accessible to anyone with the time and inclination to collect it. I have never seen sap rising outside of March, though occasional reports come to me, from people who think of foraging as a competition, of finding it in mid-February.

This is how it is done. Find a wood with at least half a dozen good-sized Birch trees. Their trunks should be at least 30 cm in diameter. It is best, though not always easy, to obtain permission from whoever owns the land and trees. This legal and moral technicality I will leave to your courage and conscience respectively.

You will need a crucial piece of equipment known as a 'spile', a tapering tube of metal with a spout and attached hook. It is this that directs the sap into your container. These are available online from North America, so

order them in plenty of time. To make the hole you need a brace and bit, the latter of a diameter that will snugly fit your spiles. To collect the sap, use a 4-litre container that can be attached to the hook and has a lid of some sort. You will also need a few tapered wooden plugs, waxed or lacquered at the narrow end, to plug the holes in the trees after the sap is collected. These can be whittled from any hardwood and are a project for winter evenings. They need to fit tightly into the hole left by the spile and should be sterilised in boiling water for a few seconds before use. You will also need a mallet, as both plugs and spiles need to be hammered home.

Drill a hole about 1.5 cm deep and at waist height in your chosen tree, aiming slightly upwards. If no sap flows, then plug the hole and move on. If you have no luck after three trees, then come back in a week. If the sap flows, drill a further 1.5 cm, hammer in your spile and attach your container. It is worth tasting the sap at this point. It should taste almost exactly like water, with a hint of sweetness and a touch of wet paper bag. If, however, you can taste the classic off-flavour of sap – popcorn – then it is too late in the year, for this tree at least.

Once the sap is flowing into the container, it is my practice to camouflage everything carefully, as what people don't see will not cause them anxiety. I suggest you do the same. Come back the next day and pour the sap into any clean container with a cap.

On a good day, with four trees tapped, you should have about 10 litres of sap, and maybe much more. You will not harm the tree by drilling a small hole in it every other year, though you will kill it stone dead if you take all of its sap or fail to plug the hole securely. Silver Birch is extremely common throughout Britain, mostly on acid soils. Downy Birch, *Betula pubescens*, is also common and distinguished by its reddish bark, but produces an inferior sap.

What can you do with it? As noted, it is almost indistinguishable from water, but very, very nice water, and water that will cost you £7 for a small can if you are mad enough to buy it. Unlike water, however, it does not keep. After even a couple of days out of the fridge it will begin to taste unpleasant. Freezing it is an option if freezer space is not a domestic battlefield.

The commonest use for Birch sap is in the making of Birch sap wine. There is nothing much wrong with this, but since the sap is effectively tasteless and all the flavour comes from additives such as grape juice, it

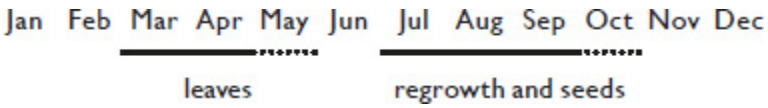
could be replaced, effortlessly, with water. A lot of people disagree with me about this, but they are wrong.

In my opinion there is only one thing worth making with Birch sap and that is syrup. It is much harder to make than maple syrup because the sugar level is comparatively very low (the best I have ever seen is 0.7 per cent, which would require 100 litres of sap for one litre of syrup), and the more chemically delicate sugars in Birch sap impart a bitter, burnt flavour if the processing temperature is too high.

The trick is to reduce the sap in a wide preserving pan on a low heat, never boiling it. When half of the water has gone, transfer to a bain-marie to reduce to a syrup. The result is nothing like maple syrup – bitter molasses gives a closer idea of what to expect. Thus it is used as a savoury glaze on meats or in drizzle sauces. Using a bain-marie from the start will markedly reduce the bitterness. If you want a dessert syrup, stop the reduction nine-tenths of the way through, then stir in sufficient white sugar to convert it into a syrup, warming it gently to allow the sugar to dissolve.

Stinging Nettle *Urtica dioica*

URTICACEAE



The humble Stinging Nettle is a fine example of a plant that can be picked in heroic quantities without the slightest rise of a conservational eyebrow. It is a weed, filling every damp, nitrogen-rich patch of ground in the kingdom with its cruel leaves. It is certainly the first plant everyone learns, and I recall my grandmother taking my four-year-old, short-trousered self for walks and sitting me on an iron bench through which Nettles grew. These were more robust times, and protestations went unheeded.

Yet its familiarity has made it a much-loved plant, an old friend, albeit a prickly one. Poets too have appreciated its character and made much use of it in verse:

> *Such is the posie Love composes;*
> *A stinging Nettle mixt with Roses.*
> William Browne, 1772

There are many, many more.

Collecting Stinging Nettles requires preparation: big boots, thick trousers, long sleeves, pink rubber gloves. I always get stung and wonder if a beekeeping suit would be a sensible investment. Are they worth the danger? Well, the flavour is good, if mild, and they are extremely good for you, beating even kale in their list of components that aid health.

The leaves need to be collected when the plant is young – about knee height. Only pick the top ten or so leaves by nipping the stem a few centimetres down from the top. These will be the freshest, and the stem will be soft and edible. Nettles are so common that you can afford to be choosy. Stop picking when the fine, drooping flower heads start to appear; the plant becomes coarse and the flavour less appealing by this time. Also, stomach-irritating and otherwise troublesome calcium oxalate crystals form in older plants. New young leaves will appear again if the plant has been cut back, with maybe two or three crops possible each year – right up until October.

Whatever you can do with spinach, you can do with Nettles. Except salad. Obviously. The most famous dish is Nettle soup, though this can taste like boiled army blankets if you do not use a good stock and thicken it with a potato or celeriac. Made properly, it is a delight. Blanched, the squeeze-dried leaves can be chopped finely and added to pasta flour to make a wild pasta verde. Cooked briefly in hot water, blanched in cold water and pureed, it has endless uses, my favourite being for a risotto. Blanching, incidentally, retains the bright green colour; without it the Nettles turn an unappetising brown. There is also Nettle beer. This fairly disgusting concoction is easy, quick and cheap to make, but has only one property which makes it worthwhile – it gets you drunk, quickly.

Leaves are not the only food provided by Nettles. By summer, any Nettle that has not been commandeered by the forager will carry seeds. Well, so one would imagine, but only half of the plants will carry the seeds as the plant is dioecious. ‘Dioecious’ is Linnaeus’ matrimonial metaphor for plants that have separate males and females (he was notoriously fond of these, this one referring to husband and wife living in separate houses). The Stinging Nettle displays this character in its Latin name. So, obviously, only the females bear seeds, and these are the plants with dangling seed heads.

The best way to harvest them is to cut off the stem just below where the seed heads have formed and lay them on a sheet somewhere dry. Leave them until the leaves have shrivelled and some of the seeds have fallen, then beat them gently on the sheet to loosen the remaining seeds. Use a sieve to remove dead leaves and wildlife. Each plant will produce about 1.5 g, which is two teaspoons full. Not much, but it is easy to collect 200 plants, which gives a substantial 300 g.

What can you do with them? They are rather like sesame seeds and similarly benefit from toasting. Sprinkle on just about anything or bake them in or on bread or savoury biscuits. They are also very good for you and used as a tonic. I grind up a teaspoonful in the mornings for those occasions when I have felt tired and emotional the night before.

Wild Garlic *Allium ursinum*

ALLIOIDEAE

If there is one species that stirs the heart of all foragers, it must be Wild Garlic. This is one of the most giving of all wild foods: it has a long, long season of about five months, a wide and abundant distribution and is also very good to eat. Wild Garlic is extremely versatile in that it is a green leaf vegetable that tastes of garlic, and not just a bulb – so it has substance as well as flavour. Furthermore, the flowers and young seed pods are also edible and good.

Wild Garlic has broad, ribbed, spear-shaped leaves, originating from a thin underground bulb. The flowers are white, six-petalled, to form a star, on individual short stalks arising from the tip of a long leafless stalk. The flowers set to produce green seed pods. To the untutored eye, the poisonous Lily of the Valley looks just the same, though its leaves are a less vibrant

green. And it does not smell at all of garlic! You can find Wild Garlic in damp wooded areas and shady hedgerows throughout Britain, though it is more common in the south.

Despite being a modern favourite with foragers, and even collected commercially on a substantial scale to supply restaurants, its virtues were little appreciated in the past. Writers would seldom mention the plant without comments such as ‘easily recognised by its repulsive odour’ or ‘unpleasantly evident to the olfactories’. When Wild Garlic is recorded as a food, it is usually about how it is used in times of famine.

Wild Garlic has many colloquial names, Somerset’s ‘Onion Stinkers’ being my favourite, though Dorset’s ‘Devil’s Posy’ is also worth a mention. But there is also an alternative general common name, ‘Ramsons’, variously spelled:

Eat leekes in Lide, and ramsins in May,
And all the yeare after physitians may play.

Well, we are not in May but in Lide (the Anglo-Saxon name for March), and the Wild Garlic is young. Wild Garlic is first seen in February, or even January, as small, but already edible shoots. It is at its best now and in April, when the leaves are fully grown and have yet to acquire the bitter intensity of later plants. By June, Wild Garlic begins to rot gently and to live up to its ancient reputation, ensuring that stretches of country lanes and entire woods become no-go areas.

The flowers appear from late April until June and are a wild gift for anyone wishing to decorate a soup or a salad. The immature seed pods are splendidly garlicky and also succulent, making them superb for a pesto, or sprinkled in a salad.

APRIL

While the first few days of April will find a landscape that is predominantly brown, by the end it is green and lush in everything except the larger trees. All is new and usually untouched by the dread hand of the council strimmer, a horror that begins in mid-May. April is the traditional month for collecting gorse and dandelion flowers (on the 23rd, though there is no rule about it!) as well as St George's Mushrooms, also on the 23rd (St George's Day).

Bulrush
Chickweed
Common Mallow
Garden Snail
Garlic Mustard
Gorse
Ground Elder
Gutweed
Hogweed
Hop (young shoots)
Morels
Pignut
Scurvygrass
Sea Beet
Sea Spaghetti
Serrated Wrack and allies
St George's Mushroom
Sweet Cicely

Also found

Alexanders
Bittercresses
Black Mustard
Broom
Carragheen and allies
Common Sorrel
Corn Salad
Cow Parsley
Cowslip and Primrose
Dandelion (flowers)
Dulse
Fat Hen
Fennel
Horseradish
Laver
Oak Moss
Pepper Dulse and allies
Pine and Spruce
Rock Samphire
Sea Kale (young leaves)
Silverweed
Spear-Leaved Orache
Stinging Nettle
Sweet Gale
Three-Cornered Leek (and Few-Flowered Leek)
Wild Garlic
Wild Marjoram
Wild Onion
Wood Ear
Wood Sorrel

Bulrush *Typha latifolia*
TYPHACEAE

Gathering Bulrushes is one of the more exciting enterprises undertaken by the forager. It involves cold water, a very great deal of mud and the outside risk of getting caught by whoever owns, or thinks they own, the Bulrushes.

The Bulrush is a plant I have loved since I was a small child, for reasons that I have never understood. Perhaps it is the splendid cat-tail flower head which makes it the ‘real thing’ in my mind, among a myriad of also-ran wetland rushes and sedges. It grows in many parts of the world and is considered a pernicious weed in places where it is not native. Indeed, it is considered a pernicious weed by gardeners with lakes or large ponds, where it will frequently launch a takeover bid. As well as garden ponds, it can be found wild in shallow fresh water and in ditches throughout lowland Britain.

Bulrushes provide several comestibles, though I only ever bother with one of them – the young shoots. The location of Bulrushes out of season is readily determined by the stranded remains of last year's flower heads. At this time of year the shoots should appear, bright and green, among a mass of dead vegetation and should ideally be cut when they are no more than 60 cm high. It is by far the best practice to cut them just above where they attach to the rhizome, but this will certainly be under at least six inches of mud, and more than likely under water as well. Hence the excitement. Waders and a carefree attitude will see you through.

The shoots look astoundingly like leeks and, as with leeks, only the succulent base is consumed. I have even managed to confuse the two in the fridge. Bulrush shoots, however, taste and smell not like leeks but like grass. They can be eaten uncooked, but, as I say, they taste like grass and we are not horses. A couple of minutes in the pan, however, will sweeten them and remove the playing-field flavour. It is difficult to think of a better use for them than in a stir-fry, so stir-fry all round it is.

If you find your pond, or a friend's pond, overwhelmed by Bulrushes, you will have the opportunity to try the rhizomes. These are flexible, rope-like structures, about 1.25 cm in diameter and requiring a great deal of muddy effort to uproot. They should be collected in early spring, before the shoots begin their annual growth. The food value comes from the starch they contain. The washed and peeled rhizomes can be eaten raw or cooked or can be dried and made into a flour by drying prepared stems then crushing them and removing the fibres, though this is a long process and best left until after the fall of civilisation. Also for use when all else fails are the pollen and the seeds – and you can weave yourself a stylish, post-apocalyptic hat with the leaves.

Chickweed *Stellaria media*

CARYOPHYLLACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

As annual weeds go, Chickweed is one of the worst. It can carpet a dug-over vegetable plot with vexatious speed, and is undeterred by hoeing. It is one of the commonest of all British plants, growing throughout lowland Britain. As with Dandelions and Bittercress, Chickweed is normally

destined for the compost heap, but stay your hand and send it to the kitchen instead.

Identification is simple: its straggling habit, the pointed/oval leaves growing in opposite pairs on long stems, the small white flowers that appear to have ten petals but which are five petals, all deeply incised. As with a few organisms, Chickweed has a ‘trick’ feature that makes identification certain: the stems bear a single line of hairs which are visible when held up to the light.

Chickweed can be found at most times of the year except high summer, but it is during the growing season that it is at its best. Raw Chickweed tastes somewhere between bean sprouts and grass, and not at all bad in a salad, provided it is young and fresh and is chopped into sufficiently short lengths to make it chewable. My preferred use is as an ingredient for a pakora. Make a batter with chickpea flour, finely sliced onion, a little curry powder, water, an optional egg, more salt than you may consider wise and

baking powder. Stir in the chopped Chickweed, then spoon the mixture into a shallow pan of hot oil. Cook both sides until brown and crisp, and serve.

Common Mallow *Malva sylvestris*

MALVACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Considering how much Common Mallow is presently consumed in Britain – very little indeed – it will come as a surprise to learn how celebrated it was in ancient times. The Greek poet Hesiod suggests that a diet of Mallow and asphodel will lead to a life of moderation, contentment and simplicity of manners. Starvation seems more likely. The plant receives its first recorded mention in the book of Job, *circa* the sixth century BC, in a characteristically gloomy reference to its use as a famine food. It has, indeed, always been a food of the poor.

There are thousands of Mallows, not all of them in the genus *Malva*, and we can seldom be certain to which Mallow the ancients were referring. Still eaten (and cultivated) today is Jew's Mallow, *Corchorus olitorius*. It is the foremost ingredient in the Middle Eastern dish Molokhia, which is a rather slimy soup made with the leaves, chicken and spices. There is no reason why Common Mallow could not be used instead. My use of the word 'slimy' is not meant to be derogatory, but is merely accurate. Mallows are noted for their mucilaginous nature, and it is considered to be a 'good thing' because it acts as a thickening agent. The most familiar, and probably the most slimy, of the cultivated mallows is okra. Common Mallow is as dust by comparison.

Common Mallows do not travel well, wilting as soon as they are picked. The answer is to collect them in a plastic box with a lid. You will need to collect a substantial quantity as Mallows display the ‘spinach effect’, cooking down to a smaller amount than seems possible with our current understanding of science. The flavour is mild and ‘green’, and Mallow can be used in any recipe calling for spinach. The more enthusiastic, and patient, cook might use the leaves to make dolmas, though several leaves may be needed to make a decent-sized parcel.

The immature seed clusters are called ‘cheeses’ because of their shape, and are edible, if not exciting. It would be fun to use Common Mallow to make marshmallows. Unfortunately you will need to dig up the roots of Marsh Mallow for this, a rare plant of coastal wetlands. Identification is simple and even simpler when in flower.

The plant is a medium to tall perennial (sometimes annual), with leaves that are roughly circular overall but with a deep incision where it is attached to the stem. They are actually composed of folding lobes, coarsely serrated at the edge and often with a dark spot in the ‘centre’ above where the leaf stem is attached. The flowers are five-petalled and a pretty pink with forking veins of purple.

Common Mallow is one of our commonest plants, growing throughout lowland Britain, though in Scotland it is mostly restricted to eastern coastal areas. Probably a Roman import, it grows in odd corners, wastelands and hedges, like most introduced species.

Garden Snail *Cornu aspersum*

HELICIDAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

I have eaten snails almost twice. The first time was in a very posh restaurant indeed, and they had been prepared (by somebody else) and did not look like snails at all. I quite liked them. The ‘almost’ time was when I determined to expand my foraging horizons and collected half a dozen from the bottom of the garden. I fed them lettuce, then starved them for a few days. Girding my loins, I cooked two of them, inexpertly unwound one from its shell and made my big mistake. I looked at it. The poor thing’s

insides were hanging out, and there was no longer any way I could put it in my mouth as I had intended. I nibbled a few of the less disgusting parts and decided that it was pretty tasteless and that I was missing nothing. Actually, there were two other occasions when I almost ate a garden snail – with lettuce from my garden in a salad prepared by my wife.

Many people enjoy the so-called edible snail, *Helix pomatia*, and good luck to them. I have spoken to some who have endless recipes for this mollusc, and they tell me that the Garden Snail is even better. If you wish to eat the snails consuming your lettuces instead of disposing of them by throwing them next door, then make sure they have not been eating anything poisonous, and purify them as I did. I can't think about this for much longer, so my brief advice is to put your purified victims in the fridge for an hour so that you can imagine they have fallen asleep, then boil them for fifteen minutes in a court bouillon. After that you are on your own, but Wild Garlic should be involved somewhere along the line. And remember, don't look at it before you pop one into your mouth.

Garlic Mustard *Alliaria petiolata*

BRASSICACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Despite appearance, name and indeed smell, Garlic Mustard is in the cabbage family. Strong smells and tastes are used by plants to defend

themselves against being eaten, and this plant takes no prisoners by producing two of the commonest classes of defensive flavour. This fiendish plan does not work with most humans, who have come to like strong flavours and not to associate them with danger. Garlic Mustard tastes nice.

The plant can be found for most of the year with just its large, kidney-shaped, serrated-edged leaves forming a basal rosette. These are perfectly edible, but the best leaves are the new ones which appear just as the plant

grows rapidly upwards to form its spike of white, four-petalled flowers. These leaves are a shiny, yellowy-green, soft and slightly sticky to the touch. Garlic Mustard is found throughout lowland Britain.

My attempts to cook this plant have met with an expected failure, though it could be finely chopped and mixed in with dumplings or mashed potato. Other than that, it is destined for the salad bowl or the cheese sandwich.

Gorse *Ulex europaeus*

FABACEAE

Individually, Gorse is a lovely plant; when it covers a hillside, it overwhelms the senses – the eyes blinded by the yellow of the sunlit blossoms and the nose filled with the scent of coconuts. Later, when the seeds are ripe and it is a hot day, there is sound too from the pods exploding with a crackle. It is so common in Britain that we view it with the eye of familiarity and treat it as a weed. Yet Britain is among its greatest strongholds, and visitors from abroad can be amazed by its exotic flamboyance. In 1736 the great Swedish botanist and taxonomist Linnaeus fell to his knees in joy at the sight of Gorse in full bloom on Putney Heath. Remarkably, the Gorse is still there.

So common a shrub was bound to find its uses. It has long been gathered as a fodder crop, and advocates claimed that their cattle and horses were never so well over-wintered as when they were fed bruised Gorse.

Gorse is found throughout lowland Britain, but is missing from the area around The Wash. It is particularly common in coastal areas and on heathland, but seems able to grow anywhere, tolerating poor soils but requiring full sunlight. There are two other species: Western Gorse, *Ulex gallii*, which is common in Wales and western England, and Dwarf Gorse, *U. minor*, which is restricted mostly to the southeastern counties of England.

There is hardly any need to provide a description other than to say it is a bush with bright yellow pea flowers and extremely prickly. It blooms most prolifically in spring, 23 April being a traditional time to pick the blossoms, as it is with Dandelions and St George’s Mushrooms. However, Gorse is famous for flowering at random times throughout the year, and it is perfectly possible to pick it at Christmas, though the fragrance is much reduced.

Unlike those of the similar Broom, the buds are not at all suitable in a salad as their sepals are very hairy: the hairs all point in one direction, ratcheting the whole bud down your throat and causing you to choke. The open petals are completely safe and should be plucked and kept in a closed container. Easily said, but it is a dangerous and uncomfortable plant to tackle, requiring at least one gloved hand to protect you from the very sharp spines.

It is the coconut scent that commends Gorse flowers to the forager. However, as overwhelming as it may be on a hillside, it is ephemeral once

used. Tea is one traditional possibility, not that I have tried it, or ever will. A vodka infusion is perhaps the best way of retaining the smell of coconuts and is a pretty sunrise gold when ready. In a country wine the coconut is almost lost, and you will need to contend with the taste of peas as well, so I cannot recommend it highly – especially as it requires enormous quantities of blossom. Sprinkled on a salad, the flowers make a fine decoration. The most imaginative use I have found for Gorse flowers is mixed in a bread dough. The cut slices are speckled with gold and look magnificent.

Ground Elder *Aegopodium podagraria*

APIACEAE

Although many common names are accessible, fun and helpful, sometimes they are worse than useless in that they confuse. Such is Ground Elder, which does indeed grow on the ground but is certainly not an Elder. The reference is to the leaves, which are supposedly similar to that of an elder tree. Worse still, ‘ground elder’ was once the common name of the European Dwarf Elder, which *is* an elder. Ground Elder is firmly in the carrot family, a treacherous group of plants, and is thought to have been one of the very many plants that the Romans brought to these shores when they decided to turn Britain into an enormous market garden. Most gardeners really wish they had left it behind in Italy. It was used in herb gardens before Parsley was introduced, but centuries of effort have failed to eradicate it. I have one of the most splendid patches of Ground Elder in Christendom, which even my wife’s application of Agent Orange has proved ineffective at removing permanently.

Since it is here to stay, we should use it. Many people sneer at it as an inferior substitute for Parsley, but they are eating it when it is far too mature. The young, bright green and still slightly folded leaves are the ones to eat. They have all the flavour of Parsley, but are softer and more succulent. Once they are picked, a new shoot will form – a cut-and-come-again plant.

It is hairless, with oval/pointed leaflets, usually in threes. At maturity (when it is too far gone to pick) it forms dense white umbels of flowers. The more mature plants, at least until before the flowers form, are edible when cooked, though not something to serve a guest you like. Geoffrey Grigson says it all in his *Englishman's Flora*: 'Ground Elder makes spicy and tolerable eating if the leaves are boiled like spinach.' Not enough to entice, I think.

Gutweed *Ulva intestinalis*

CHLOROPHYTA

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Gutweed is one seaweed you will never have trouble finding, and when you do find some, there will be more than you could use in a lifetime. In fact, it is often a weed species, with tons of it piling up on beaches after stormy weather, annoying holiday-makers with its overwhelming smell of, believe it or not, truffles. The chemical that causes the trouble is dimethydisulphide, an important controlling factor in the weather, precipitating particles that then form as cloud and rain. Most of it comes from green seaweeds such as Gutweed.

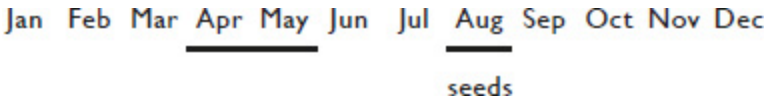
Gutweed is one of a small group of green, filamentous seaweeds. It is not immediately obvious which one is which, but if you collect the coarser filaments or those that can sometimes appear as inflated tubes (hence, Gutweed), you will not go far wrong. It grows on the upper and mid-shore, and can readily tolerate low salinities, so below a stream running into the sea is a common place to find it. There will be no need for restraint or care, just grab as much as you think you will need. It is best picked while it is floating in the water, as this will avoid collecting sand at the same time, though it will still need serious washing, so do follow the advice on p. 36.

It is impossible to eat Gutweed raw, as it cannot be chewed with any hope of success. And it is tasteless uncooked. As so often, deep-frying comes to the rescue. Drop small handfuls of squeeze-dried Gutweed into a cooking oil at 180° C in a deep pan, turn them over once. The overall cooking time will only be a minute or two. Drain on kitchen paper and sprinkle with salt. Very much unlike fresh Gutweed, fried Gutweed melts in

the mouth, releasing a crispy burst of umami. It is also a beautiful, shiny green. This is not something to eat in large quantities, but sprinkled over fish, or fried and served as small ‘cakes’ laid artistically against a scallop, it is first-class.

Hogweed *Heracleum sphondylium*

APIACEAE



Hogweed is a very common plant of hedgerows, rough ground and odd corners of fields. It is a biennial or short-lived perennial, depending on its mood, and springs up every year in vast numbers. It forms dense clusters of itself or makes an appearance every metre or so along a roadside or pathway. In other words, you will not have much trouble finding it.

It is a member of the carrot family and harmless. The fact that it is an extremely hairy plant does help, as Hemlock (p. 357) and Hemlock Water-Dropwort (p. 355), the two common deadly species in the family, are completely bald. The leaves of Hogweed are different too, being broad and irregularly incised. The only plant that could be confused with Hogweed is the Giant Hogweed, *Heracleum mantegazzianum*, which has very broad, roughly palmate leaves. It can grow to 4 m tall, which does rather give the game away. It is not poisonous, as far as I know, but it is notorious in causing photosensitisation to the skin, resulting in long-lived lesions. Its usual habitat is riversides.

There are two crops available from Hogweed: the young shoots and the immature seeds. The leaf shoots appear one or two at a time over a very long period from spring until early summer. If the plant is cut back, it will produce more. These, when they are 10 or 12 cm long and curled up tight, are very succulent, with a pleasant Parsley flavour. They are also very hairy, which makes them unpalatable raw, but dipped in a tempura or other batter and fried, they are perfect. They young flower shoots can be used in the same way and are more succulent, but do remove the fibrous sheath first.

The (still green) seeds are collected during the late summer and the autumn. While some people have described the flavour as that of toilet cleaner, my forager friend Mark Williams is more encouraging, with ‘orange peel, cardamom, coriander, ginger, liquorice and burnt cedar’. If we go with Mark, they position themselves nicely, when dried and powdered, as a curry ingredient.

Hop *Humulus lupulus*

CANNABACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

shoots flowers

Few plants are confined to hedges, but for the Hop this seems to be a preferred habitat, though it will also grow on waste ground, scrub and fens. Wherever it grows it can become dominant, strangling its neighbours.

The Hop plant is best known for its flowers, unimaginatively known as hops, which appear in September. But the first crop it produces is the fast-growing tips of the vine: hence its inclusion in April. These tips (about 10 cm), despite being covered by something resembling Velcro, are very succulent when lightly cooked. A typical population of Hops will produce scores, even hundreds, of these tips and are well worth collecting for their rich, hoppy flavour. They sauté very well and can be served as they are or with beaten egg poured over for an omelette.

Now on to the hops, the flowers of the Hop plant. Considering the possibility that agriculture began as the pursuit of beer (the commonest plant cultivated was barley, an essential ingredient), it is surprising that it took so long for Hops to be settled on as by far the best flavouring ingredient. The earliest record of its cultivation is the ninth century, and there is no written record of it until the Middle Ages in Britain. A return to Sweet Gale, Mugwort and Yarrow ale is unthinkable now, save in specialist beers. Hops must have been designed by a benevolent deity for the task we now give it: the aroma, the bitterness and its preservative powers make it perfect for the job.

Commercial Hop varieties possess precisely measured and known characteristics, and a beer connoisseur will be able to tell which ones were used. With wild Hops it is a lucky dip, but a little more exciting because of the unpredictability of it all. There is a tendency for wild Hops to revert to a rather poor East Kent Goldings or Fuggles, so use one of the recipes for those beers.

Considering how very much people like the smell of hops (when you find some, do roll them between your fingers to release the very sticky and aromatic resin), it is odd that they are seldom found outside a bottle of beer. But they are usable elsewhere, and very good as a flavouring if employed with imagination. I often make what I consider to be the best of all ice creams by dropping a small muslin bag of hops into the hot, egg custard base to infuse for two minutes after the boil. If you wish to try this (or a panna cotta), then use hops with high aroma and low bitterness properties, and do not exceed the two minutes, as bitterness is the enemy of this recipe.

On a visit to some hop fields in Herefordshire I met the man in charge and his wife. She offered me a piece of cake (a species of Victoria sponge, I think) that tasted, wonderfully, of hops. She had put a layer of them at the bottom of her cake tin below the paper cake-case she was using. The heated hops had released their aroma to infuse the cake. Rather taken by this, I have developed it further by using malt (the sugary product of malted barley used in beer-making) instead of sugar to make the cake.

Like most climbing plants, Hops grow very quickly and will climb up telegraph poles, fences and trees provided there is enough light. Having escaped from captivity, they now grow throughout lowland England south from Leeds, occasionally in Wales and rarely in Scotland. If you are determined to find some, then visit the area around current or former Hop

fields. Wherever you find them, there is a good chance you will gather enough to last the year all in one place. If not used straight away, they should be quickly and carefully dried and kept in a sealed container or sealed in a good-quality plastic bag and kept in the freezer. I vacuum-pack mine.

The Hop plant is both conspicuous and obvious when in flower, the petals first green, then brown. Before that, you will need to rely on the general growth form (climber), the stem, which is square in section and covered in fine, backward-pointing hooks, and the leaves, which are pointed-palmate with a serrated edge.

Morel *Morchella esculenta* and allies

MORCHELL ACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Morels are perhaps the most unreliable of all our wild foods. I spent twenty years searching the New Forest for them, only to discover that they simply do not grow there. Eventually my wife's friend found a particularly huge

Black Morel growing on her compost heap and gave it to me for an identification. I didn't give it back. Then I found a dilapidated specimen on old Charlie's allotment, a couple outside Kwik Fit in Weymouth and a single one in a friend's garden. But sometimes you can be very lucky.

I was asked by the director of the *River Cottage* TV programme if I could find some for the show. I said, 'Not a chance', but mentioned those that I had found in my village. Undeterred, they went ahead, asking me only Morel when was the most likely date. I plucked 25 April out of the air, and a camera crew, the presenter (Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall) and the director duly turned up. I have never, before or since, seen so many Morels in my life. Evidently knowing that their moment in the spotlight had come, they popped up in no fewer than six village locations on the same day.

Black Morel

Despite their elusive nature, Morels seem extremely fond of human company. All of my finds have been in someone's garden or in the forest bark that surrounds the shrubbery in supermarket car parks. Despite this, the two species have different habitat requirements and different habits. The Morel forms a permanent mycelium and can, with luck, be found in the same place for several decades. The Black Morel grows quickly in loose, dead organic matter and seldom reappears in the same place. Both seem to need trees or shrubs near by, though neither is mycorrhizal (see p. 50).

Morels are the most highly prized of all the edible fungi after Truffles. Their flavour is strongly mushroomy, though, as with so many things, they

are best when dried and powdered. However, Morels must *always* be cooked as they contain small quantities of toxins that have been known to cause problems but which are removed or destroyed by heat.

There is one species that is related to the Morels and looks a little like them but which is seriously poisonous. It is the False Morel, *Gyromitra esculenta* (see p. 346).

Pignut *Conopodium majus*

APIACEAE

It is my great pleasure every year to show people how to collect Pignuts. It is not easy, being both a puzzle and test of dexterity. And of patience. It is also addictive, and I have hard-hearted hedge fund managers at the end of a foray begging me for the chance of finding just one more nut.

Pignuts are not nuts, but tubers that look like nuts in that they are small (the largest I have seen being barely 2.5 cm across) and more or less spherical. They grow at the end of a long root which is really a diminishingly fine and delicate subterranean extension of the stem. The superterranean part of the plant is only visible from late winter until late June, when it dies back completely. I have placed it in April because that is the first month in which it becomes sufficiently conspicuous to be found with ease. Since the digging up of wild roots when the plant is not visible is destructive of habitat and can find the wrong root, it is only during this growth period that it should be collected. As a member of the carrot family, it produces the familiar umbels of flowers. It is a very short member, growing to only 30 cm tall. The leaves are so fine it is difficult to see how it manages to support itself.

It is a species found throughout the British Isles. But as a grassland perennial, it requires time to establish, and it is to permanent grasslands that one must look. These are almost invariably homes for many other interesting organisms and will frequently be protected in law. Despite my disdain for the law demanding that plants should not be unrooted without permission of the landowner, when it comes to Pignuts I am all for it. Do ask, and should you obtain such permission, collect just a handful and do so

with care. Pignuts can also be found in woodland, at wood edges or beside hedgerows.

Having found a Pignut plant, clear the excess vegetation from around the stem and begin to cut and scrape away with a knife. A strong dinner knife, held like a pencil, is by far the best to use, as it has a rounded end, ideal for careful digging. Follow the fine thread of root while holding the plant in the other hand. The ‘nut’ can be anywhere in a hemispherical radius (centred on where the plant stem reaches the ground) of 5 cm. If you break the stem, you will not be able to find the ‘nut’ without strenuous and destructive digging. Ideally, the hole should be less than 5 cm in diameter – and remember to put back your divots.

The ecological mayhem caused by random digging of Pignuts can be seen when badgers take to searching them out. A local nature reserve that is notable for its fine grassland looked as though someone had taken a harrow round it several times. Wild boar show even more enthusiasm for Pignuts and will upturn large areas of turf in their search, destroying areas of prime ecological interest.

It is, of course, the pig's interest in Pignuts that gives them their name. They have also been known as 'hog nuts', 'earth nuts' and (in Ireland) 'fairy potatoes'. My favourite is the whimsical 'Lucy Arnots', the 'surname' at least being explicable as a corruption of 'earth nut'.

Pignuts have a long history of casual collection, invariably, so the records suggest, by boys. It is one of the few wild sources of starch, and worth the effort if food is scarce. The flavour is very good – like a hazelnut when raw and halfway between a new potato and a Sweet Chestnut when boiled or sautéed. Since it is unlikely that you will collect very many of these earthy treasures, those that you do find should be used well. The ideal, I think, is as a replacement for Pine Nuts in a wild pesto. Do beware, however. The herbalist Culpepper notes that it is 'under the dominion of Venus' and thus can 'provoke lust exceedingly and stir up to those sports she is mistress of'.

Scurvygrass *Cochlearia* spp.

BR ASSICACEAE

Few plants bear in their name so overt an indication of their use as Scurvygrass. As long ago as the second century, the Greek physician Galen wrote of its virtues, and it has long been recognised as a cure for and preventative of scurvy. The Latin name of Common Scurvygrass, *Cochlearia officinalis*, indicates the plant's use as a herbal remedy, because '*officinalis*' refers to an apothecary's storeroom; *Cochlearia*, incidentally, means 'spoon', a reference to the shape of the leaves. Scurvy is a disease of the past in the Western world, or at least it should be. Vitamin C needs to be consumed every day, and even people with no symptoms may have the disease. The cabbage family is known to be a good source of vitamin C, with Scurvygrass containing more than most, but cabbages keep poorly on board ship, and it is notoriously sailors who suffered, so a few captains grew cress (a close relative) for the crew.

Because Scurvygrass cured *something* (scurvy), it was presumed to cure many things. In the seventeenth century one Dr Andreas Valentinus Molimbrochius of Lipswick wrote a long treatise on the plant, '*Cochlearia curiosa*: or the Curiosities of Scurvygrass', praising the plant's mostly imaginary virtues at considerable length. Most of the potions, especially those that require distillation or heat (vitamin C is destroyed with excessive heat) would have proved useless. He does, however, mention a problem with Scurvygrass that may now be seen more as an asset: 'One thing I think necessary to give you notice of which is that several of the Galenick Medicines described are so disgustful … that few pallats can readily comply with the use of them.' Scurvygrass is hot, peppery and acrid, and still not to everyone's taste. However, if you like wasabi, you are in luck.

The leaves, stems and flowers are all edible on this small plant, so snipping the whole thing off with scissors is fine. The obvious use is in salad, but a rather vicious pesto can be made from them too.

There are several species of Scurvygrass in Britain, showing fairly distinct regional preferences. Common Scurvygrass inhabits most of the coast of Britain, though missing from much of the south and south-east coast; English Scurvygrass (*C. anglica*) is found scattered around the coast and filling the gap left by its cousin. These may be near the beach, but 'coastal' in this case can be a fair way inland, often in gardens and along pavements and hedge verges. There are even Scurvygrasses that prefer rocky upland areas, though these are less common. The most noticeable, however, is Danish Scurvygrass, *C. danica*. In April this exotic species lines the salted roadsides of lowland England and Wales with its pale pink flowers. I am not particularly fussy about where my wild food comes from, but the very edge of a busy road is too toxic even for me.

Sea Beet *Beta vulgaris maritima*

CHENOPODIACEAE

Of all the many wild green vegetables available, Sea Beet is the best. Its fine qualities are many: it is available all year round, it is common in its established locations and it has an excellent flavour and texture.

Sea Beet is of enormous importance, not so much as a wild food but because it is the wild ancestor of many of our crops. Perpetual spinach, fodder beet, beetroot, Swiss chard and, most important of all, sugar beet are descendants of this genetically rich species. It is in the Goosefoot family, along with spinach and also native wild plants such as Spear-Leaved Orache (see p. 155). Unlike these, however, it produces thick, succulent leaves adapted to the desiccating environment of the seashore and which do not wilt to nothing when cooked. The flavour is sweeter, richer and milder than that of spinach.

This paragon of culinary virtue can be found on the upper shore and in grassland and rough areas near the sea. It even grows in the cracks in the promenade. Geographically, it is found all the way around the coast of Britain except in Scotland, where it is largely confined to the south-west.

Sea Beet is a long-lived perennial which retains its leaves all year. In early spring these proliferate, and in April the young flower shoots start to form, nestling in new leaves. This is the most succulent part of the plant, provided it is picked while still small. But in truth Sea Beet is a very giving plant. All leaves – big or small (they can grow from postage-stamp size to A4) – are succulent and good. By the time the long flower shoots have grown, most of the leaves have shrivelled to nothing. This situation continues for a few more weeks before the plant begins to put energy back into new leaves. Even in the ‘famine’ months of late spring and early summer some plants will bear no flowers and continue to produce the edible leaves.

Raw, the leaves are a little bitter; steamed for fifteen minutes, they are sweet and soft, but have a tendency to blacken. Blanching (hot water for a minute, then iced water) before cooking helps.

Sea Beet has a large edible root, which I tried once. It tasted faintly of beetroot, though there was none of beetroot's colour to be seen, and it was slightly sweet. It was worth it just the once, but digging up your supplier of edible leaves is not a wise move.

Sea Spaghetti *Himanthalia elongata*

PHAEOPHYCEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Sea Spaghetti is related to the wracks that cover the upper shore. However, it grows a little further down the beach, so you will need a good, low tide in order to collect it. Fortunately, it often detaches in storms and enough can be collected from the beach.

It is the easiest of all the seaweeds to identify, with its very long, branching, flattened, brown fronds. It lashes and swirls in the sea as though some maritime creature were tossing its long, thick mane. You may have noticed small brown discs attached to the rocks, the size and shape, if not the colour, of Pontefract cakes. These are juvenile Sea Spaghettis, and you may also see the young fronds just starting to grow from their centre. There is also the vaguely similar Mermaid's Tresses, *Chorda filum*, but this is finer, unbranched and too tough to eat.

Sea Spaghetti is best collected when young, before it toughens too much. It is easy with this species to pick with care, as you can simply snip off a frond here and there. The flavour is very mild and with a soft texture, just like spaghetti, and so can be used in the same recipes – even that most British of all dishes, spaghetti bolognese. This is a terrific seaweed for those who like to keep away from gluten, the generally health-conscious and anyone who simply likes to try something rather odd. I suggest mixing a small amount of cooked Sea Spaghetti with a large amount of real spaghetti to start with.

Steamed for twenty minutes, it is *al dente* to perfection and can be used hot, or cold in salads. The texture of the uncooked seaweed is rubbery/crunchy and works nicely in a cold or hot pickle (you can follow the same recipe as for Serrated Wrack, below). You may, however, have trouble getting any takers when you pass around the seaweed pickle. It is a step too far for many, or maybe two steps.

Serrated Wrack *Fucus serratus* and allies

PHAEOPHYCEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Serrated Wrack, Bladder Wrack, Spiralled Wrack, Channelled Wrack and more are the dominant seaweeds of the mid- and upper tidal zone on most rocky shores. For the forager, however, they are a disappointment. They can be eaten, but their texture is at once chewy and slimy. However, when they are very young, they are worth collecting.

The wracks invariably grow on rocks, and when they recolonise, the newly growing fronds are softly succulent. When they are 3 or 4 cm long, they can be cut and served raw. Better still is a hot pickle. Wash them

thoroughly, then boil them in a spicy, sweetened vinegar for three minutes. Drain and serve immediately, perhaps with a little oil. If this sounds terrible to you, then do be reassured. You will be in no doubt by now of my picky approach to food and despite this, even *I* like it.

St George's Mushroom *Calocybe gambosa*
LYOPHYLLACEAE • SPORES WHITE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

A lady once won me in a raffle. She could do with me what she would for a single day and took the relatively safe option of a mushroom foray. She seemed a little quiet, and I wondered if she was wishing that the large box of Ferrero Rocher had been hers instead. We approached the gate of a small wood, and I stopped and expressed the opinion that *Clitocybe fragrans* would be found inside because I could smell them. Fifteen paces inside we found a small group. A strong point in my favour, Ferrero Rochers forgotten.

Odour is an important identification characteristic and much underused. St George's Mushrooms are similarly endowed with a strong scent, and I can identify them with a sniff, though from much closer. The smell is described as 'farinaceous', which means 'mealy', though raw pastry is the usual comparison I make. *Farina*, incidentally, is Latin for 'flour' or 'meal'. Fresh specimens smell very strong, and some people find them overpowering. Cooking, however, diminishes their potency to palatability, so do not be dissuaded by first olfactory impressions. St George's Mushrooms have a long history of collection in Britain, and people have always either loved them or hated them. Revd Dr Charles David Badham, a nineteenth-century mycologist, described them as the '*ne plus ultra* of culinary friandise', which I think means he was of the former opinion.

What everyone agrees on is that they are very easy to identify.

Their season alone is an excellent indicator, as almost nothing else that looks remotely like them is around at that time. They appear from about mid-April to the end of May, though, of course, 23 April is the ‘traditional’ date for their appearance because it is St George’s Day. In fact, they do indeed often grow on that day, and it is a great pleasure to enjoy so patriotic a meal (for the English) at the right time.

Their second notable property is their habit of growing, in permanent grassland, in a ring or, at least, a partial ring. Ring species are, by their nature, perennial, and it is possible to revisit a patch every year for decades, watching it get bigger and bigger. The mushroom itself is off-white, domed and neat in appearance when young. In maturity it takes on a disreputable aspect, as though it hasn’t been looking after itself. The cap darkens to a patchy brown with some dirty pink, and it becomes irregular. The gills are close together and white, the stem is off-white when young and swollen at the base. The texture of the flesh is very dense and firm, and needs more cooking than with most mushrooms.

Sweet Cicely *Myrrhis odorata*

APIACEAE

So many of our wild foods are more common in the southern half of Britain that it is pleasing to find something that prefers the rigours of life up north. In fact Sweet Cicely *will* grow in the south (there is some in my garden), but it will not germinate without the intense cold available during winters north of Leeds. I visit Scotland two or three times a year to take wild food forays, and it is a delight to see a roadside adorned with what looks superficially like the largely useless Cow Parsley but is actually the endlessly useful Sweet Cicely.

As with all edible members of the carrot family, a familiarity with those that are certainly not edible is required. For example, the lace-like leaves are somewhat similar to those of Hemlock, but those of Sweet Cicely are finely downy, whereas Hemlock is hairless. However, confusion is not a major concern because of the intense, sweet aniseed smell released from any part of the plant when crushed – something you will certainly not find with Hemlock.

Every part of the plant is edible and can be used anywhere an aniseed flavour is needed. With fish, in a panna cotta, in a rhubarb crumble, ice cream, as a vodka infusion (obviously) – the list is limited only by your imagination. The best part of the plant is the immature seed pod, which can reappear for much of the summer if the plant is repeatedly cut back. These cluster, upright and succulent, and are easily picked. Their texture is nutty and quite startlingly sweeter and more aromatic than that of the leaves. Despite its name and flavour, there is little sugar in Sweet Cicely; the sweetness comes entirely from anethole (literally ‘anise oil’). Thus the plant may be used as a zero-calorie sweetener, traditionally with strawberries.

MAY

Spring is now full throttle, and by the end of the month all is green. The seaweeds are at their freshest and sufficiently well developed to make collecting worthwhile, and the seashore as a whole has come alive, with many of the succulent green plants in full leaf. April and May together are the ‘green’ months, with everything fresh; by June the hedgerows and verges will have been cut back, and many plants will be past their best, so do make the most of May.

Beech
Broom
Carragheen and allies
Dabberlocks (and Wakame)
Dulse
Fat Hen
Fennel
Laver
Lime
Oar Weed and allies
Pepper Dulse and allies
Pine and Spruce
Sea Purslane
Sea Rocket
Spear-Leaved Orache
Sugar Kelp
Sweet Gale
Sweet Vernal Grass
Watercress
Watermint and allies
Wild Onion
Wood Sorrel
Yarrow

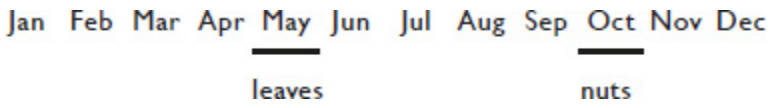
Also found

Annual Sea-Blite
Bittercresses
Black Mustard
Chickweed
Common Mallow
Common Sorrel
Corn Salad
Dandelion (flowers)
Elder (flowers)
Garden Snail
Garlic Mustard
Gorse
Ground Elder
Gutweed
Hogweed
Hop (young shoots)
Horseradish
Morels
Oak Moss
Perennial Wall Rocket
Pignut
Rock Samphire
Scurvygrass
Sea Beet
Sea Kale (‘broccoli’, the flowers and some young leaves)
Sea Spaghetti
Serrated Wrack and allies
Silverweed
St George’s Mushroom
Stinging Nettle
Sweet Cicely
Sweet Woodruff

Wild Garlic (some leaves, flowers and immature seed pods)
Wild Marjoram
Wood Ear
Wormwoods

Beech *Fagus sylvatica*

FAGACAEA



There are two crops obtainable from Beech: one unreliable and nice, and one completely reliable but not to everyone's taste. Beech trees will, obviously, produce leaves every year, and the very young, shiny, hairy, light-green leaves are the best. These appear from late April to mid-May. Tasteless and chewy without any crunch is my take on them, but who says food has to taste good? If you are truly hungry, then young Beech leaves will taste fine enough.

Apart from Beech-leaf salads and sandwiches, there is Beech leaf noyau. This really does taste good. Very young leaves are packed loosely into a jar and the jar topped up with gin or white rum. After two weeks to a month, the liquor is decanted off and a sugar syrup added.

In October the second crop from Beech arrives: Beech nuts. Unfortunately they only deign to make an appearance of good size and quantity every five to ten years, usually accompanied by a large acorn crop and more abundant and larger Sweet Chestnuts. The wait is reasonably worthwhile, as the flavour of these tiny, triangular nuts is very good, like that of Brazil nuts or Hazel. They also contain a high percentage of an oil that has been likened in quality to good olive oil; the nuts are also protein-rich.

Beech nuts form inside the beechmast which covers the forest floor in late September and October. It is seldom necessary to open the mast as the nuts fall out naturally, only to hide in the general mess of mast and leaf litter. So hands and knees must be employed to collect them, though if it is one of those years, there will be a lot to find. Unfortunately, you will still have to remove the rather tough shell that encloses the kernels.

I sometimes wonder if I make an unnecessary fuss about collecting Beech nuts, as in the past they were gathered on an industrial scale. During and after the Second World War children were encouraged to collect them and offered about 7/6 d. (about £15 today) for a hundredweight (about 50 kg). The nuts were dried, disrobed of their shells and fed to pigs – a bit of a pity, as they are a more efficient and arguably tastier food when eaten without a porcine intermediary. Fifteen pounds is a substantial amount of money, but it is a lot of nuts – 400,000 by my calculation. But then, there was nothing on telly …

Unless you are as skilled and patient as Second World War children, Beech nuts will be an on-the-go snack, but I suggest going with at least one recipe, one from the First World War, which is simply to use them as a stuffing in squirrel.

Broom *Cytisus scoparius*

FABACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Broom receives a brief mention, as it has only one minor contribution to the forager's table – its closed buds. These appear in mid- to late spring. Broom is a very common shrub and one often grown in an urban setting: the best population I know inhabits a roundabout in West Dorset. It is familiar to most people as a garden plant, usually in hybrid and varietal form and frequently with variegated or red flowers. Most of the wild population can be found in disturbed ground and entwined in hedgerows. It grows throughout the country, with the exception of the broad band from The Wash to east Devon, where it is absent or uncommon. It insists on sunny situations and will tolerate very acidic soils provided they are well drained.

The shrub is tall, at over 2 metres high, and has a multitude of green branches which half-heartedly bear small leaves that soon fall. It flowers very prolifically, with brilliant yellow blossoms. It is these that are collected as salad decoration or, better still, collect the buds. These taste of peas: unremarkably so because Broom is in the pea family. They can also be pickled as 'capers'. In the unlikely event that you are tempted to eat any other part of the plant, resist, as it will be poisonous.

Carragheen *Chondrus crispus* and
False Carragheen *Mastocarpus stellatus*
RHODOPHY TA (PHYLUM)

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Since I have a sweet tooth, Carragheen is something I collect every time I visit a rocky shore at a good low tide. Not that it is sweet, but it is used to set milk dishes (rose panna cotta, for example) as a vegetarian alternative to gelatine. In this it excels, forming a good set that is considerably less sticky than the carnivorous option. It does bear the merest aromatic hint of Lyme Bay, the Gower Peninsula or wherever it came from, but that is just a bonus.

The chemical constituents that perform this magic are polysaccharides known as carragheenans. These bind to proteins to form a set and are thus ideal for setting anything containing milk. Fruit or savoury jellies are just about possible, but you will need a much stronger concentration of the seaweed, which will leave a correspondingly stronger reminder of the seaside.

It is an extremely variable species, and seems to have geographical variations: the Carragheen in south Wales, for example, is quite different from that in my own Dorset. The ‘classic’ form is pictured here – flat and branching. Other forms have much narrower ‘branches’, and frequently it is seen with the branches grown from a flat area of the seaweed, like fingers from a palm. These tend to be more membranous than cartilaginous, as with the previous two forms. Purplish brown is the main colour seen, but it can be dark red, and yellow from sun-bleaching.

As you would expect, False Carragheen is very similar and not that easy to distinguish with casual confidence from the ‘real’ stuff, especially as it, too, is very variable. It is overall more wiry and bushy, the fronds are channelled, often covered with pronounced pimply reproductive structures, and it is generally dark. But it does not matter at all to the forager, as they both set milk. Both species attach to rocks, often on the edges of rock pools and similar structures, sometimes atop flat rocks. They are relatively small seaweeds, a single tuft being about the size of a small fist. Carragheens are found on most rocky shores around Britain and are therefore more scarce on the southern and eastern coasts. They will even grow on pebbly beaches if the pebbles are large and the beach protected from heavy seas.

Both seaweeds dry very well, and you might consider drying them until they bleach, as they then lose more of that hint of the seaside. To make the rose-petal panna cotta, boil fresh or reconstituted Carragheen in the milk for twenty-five minutes, then stir in sugar until dissolved. Add a fair handful of rose petals and turn off the heat after two minutes. Strain through muslin, and whisk in the cream. This ‘recipe’ is notable for its coyness about quantities, but as a guide 80 g of fresh seaweed will set a litre of panna cotta. You can adapt the recipe for fish mousse and so on.

Finally, Carragheen has a use in the making of beer and is thus a seaweed that is always in my cupboard. A small quantity, added at the end of the boil, will help to clear the beer.

Dabberlocks *Alaria esculenta* and **Wakame** *Undaria pinnatifida*

PHAEOPHYCEAE

These two, related species are kelps, and both have a distinct central rib. They are superficially similar to one another – not that it matters, because both are edible and they can be used in the same dishes. Should you feel the need to be sure, Wakame has a holdfast that looks like a bellows. Wakame is a non-native species confined mostly to the south coast of England and the southerly coast of East Anglia. It is likely to increase its range as it is firmly on the international black list of one hundred worst invasive species along with the black rat, prickly pear, Dutch Elm disease fungus and ourselves. The native Dabberlocks is largely absent from the south coast of England, east of Devon and most of eastern England, but is commonly found at low water on rocky shores elsewhere.

Dabberlocks

The fronds of both are softer and thinner than with other kelps, enabling them to be used much as one would use Dulse, but also in a salad. Wakame is now well known in Britain because of its use in Japanese cuisine, so there is a wealth of recipes for this species, such as in a salad, often with cucumber or dressed with soy sauce, mirin, sesame oil and seeds, rice vinegar and chilli.

Wakame

Dulse *Palmaria palmata*

RHODOPHYTA

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Dulse is in my top five foraging favourites, and quite possibly number one. It is the one thing I forage that I eat nearly every day. Dulse is around all year but, like most seaweeds, is only available in the winter where there is a large tidal range. Late April is the earliest you are likely to find most forageable seaweeds, though new growth will be more evident by late May. Dulse occurs at mid-tidal range and below.

It is a fairly easy species to identify. The colour is a dull red, the fronds flat and about the texture of thin white card. They are broad, tapering towards the holdfast, which may be attached to rocks or other seaweeds. Laid flat, the fronds look like a caricature of a hand, complete with fingers. There are several species that vaguely resemble Dulse, but it is a fairly large seaweed when fully mature, unlike most of its lookalikes. The broad, red fronds of *Dilsea carnosa* are the most likely to confound, but they lack the distinct fingers, the fronds are thick and the red is more bloody. Remember

that, if you do get it wrong, nothing bad will happen beyond a potentially unpleasant meal.

Scissors are essential for this seaweed, with a frond here and a frond there being cut. Choose those that are bright and fresh-looking, with no ‘dead zones’ where the colour has been lost, or those that are ragged and tired or covered with other species. If you just grab it in any condition, you will only have to sort through it when you get back home.

Steamed Dulse (twenty minutes is about right) turns instantly green and looks like kale when cooked. It also tastes a little like kale, with an overlay of iodine and seashore. I cannot say I would like to sit down to a plate of it, but if used in a dish with other things it is excellent. Sea Beet and Dulse, maybe with some smoked fish, in a quiche is superb, as is a Dulse rosti. Dulse crisps have to be tried to be believed. Wash your Dulse, pat it slightly dry, then dust with flour. Drop the Dulse, a few pieces at a time, in a good cooking oil at 180° C. Make sure all parts are cooked, and remove when it stops fizzing – perhaps ten seconds, perhaps a minute. Drain on paper towels. They are the littoral version of Pringles – you have one and then must have another and another.

I dry most of the Dulse I collect, first on the old bouncy sheet that once topped my daughters' trampoline in the garden, then to crispiness in the oven on a low heat. I then put it in my serious blender and powder it as finely as I can. This powder, along with wild mushroom powder, goes into nearly every savoury dish I make.

Fat Hen *Chenopodium album*

CHENOPODIACAEA

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Until the arrival of spinach, Fat Hen was a significant part of the diet of many. Tollund Man, who lived in the fourth century BC, had Fat Hen seeds in his stomach, and in the mid-nineteenth century it was listed alongside potatoes, shallots, horseradish and two dozen other common inhabitants of the kitchen garden. Not that anyone needs to grow the stuff, as it appears all too readily, with no encouragement required. It will grow on any rich soil, as colloquial names such as midden myles, muckweed, dirtweed and dirty dick attest. A common name in the nineteenth century was bacon weed, probably owing to its ability to completely cover a disused pigsty. But the soil does not need to be as rich as a midden. It is a weed that quickly populates cultivated soil if not immediately planted up with crops, and even then it will fill the gaps between rows of vegetables unless you take up hoeing as a full-time hobby.

The best thing, then, is to eat it. I once saw a fellow allotment holder laboriously raking and hoeing his plot to remove the young Fat Hen only two weeks after he had dug the soil over. His intention was to plant spinach, so I suggested that his best plan was simply to eat successive crops of Fat Hen instead. The yield would certainly be greater, as four or five crops are easily obtained by cutting the plants when they are only 15 to 20 cm high. The whole plant is edible at that point – and at this youthful stage it is easily identified. He took no notice, of course. I sometimes think gardeners feel the need to suffer.

Fat Hen can be found nearly everywhere except in Scotland, where it has a generally eastern or coastal distribution. Like most of its relatives in the Goosefoot family, it is a very variable plant. But the young plants are distinctive, with roughly diamond-shaped, pale-green leaves, covered with little whitish granules, which together look like a frosting. These come off easily in the hand, which is soon covered with them. The leaf edges are gently toothed.

Fully grown plants are also edible, but you will find yourself laboriously picking the leaves one at a time. When mature, the plant will produce many thousands of seeds, and these too are edible. In fact, quinoa is a related plant, though its seeds are much bigger. Despite the diminutive size, their sheer quantity has led to them being used to make a bread when other crops fail – ‘failure’ not being in Fat Hen’s vocabulary. It is a famine food – but not the best, as its nutritional value is low and there is some suspicion that it is toxic in large quantities. If you are not already discouraged, it is worth

adding that the tiny orange ‘beans’ that you might find mixed with your seeds are weevil larvae. If you would like to try them (seeds, not weevils), then employ the process described on p. 95 for collecting Stinging Nettle seeds.

Fennel *Foeniculum vulgare*

APIACEAE

Fennel shows all the classic signs of a plant that has not quite settled into its new home. It was introduced by the Romans and now scratches a living in odd corners, the middle of dual carriageways, hedgerows and rough coastal land. If one had to define its main habitats, they are urban and coastal. Fennel does not endure low temperatures particularly well and is uncommon, and largely coastal, north of Hull.

The wild plant is precisely the same as the cultivated one. I have two Fennel plants in my garden which fortuitously and mysteriously planted themselves in exactly the right place.

There is no mistaking Fennel, as everyone is familiar with its finely feathery leaves and powerful anise smell. The leaves and seeds are useful in so many dishes that I will leave their use to you. The flower buds, flowers and immature seed heads are less often employed, but their combination of anise and succulence makes them the best part of the plant. The flavour of leaf, bud and flower is retained for a long time in a spirit such as vodka, and Fennel schnapps should be firmly on the list of things to make. It is famously a good drink to settle the stomach, with the added advantage of settling one’s nerves.

Laver *Porphyra umbilicalis*

RHODOPHY TA

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Laver, like a pot noodle, simply does not look edible. There the similarity between the two ends. Laver is an upper- to mid-shore seaweed, often found draped over rocks, clinging to pebbles or attached to wracks and kelps (though the latter will be one of the allies, *P. dioica*). The most familiar of the habitats is on lone boulders sat on an otherwise sandy beach.

It is remarkable-looking seaweed: a broad, thin, membranous sheet of translucent brown ‘rubber’, up to 30 cm across. In the sea it is quite a

beauty, floating like a fine silk handkerchief. When the tide is out, it hangs in dark brown, shiny clumps, and if hanging very high up from, say, a concrete pillar, it looks like a sleeping bat.

Appearances are not truly deceptive in the case of Laver, as any attempt to eat it raw will be defeated – it is like trying to eat cling film. Cooked Laver (laverbread), by contrast, is very good to eat, though it does look a little like a cowpat. It has long been used, but always as a local, peasant food, eaten where it is gathered. South Wales (where it can still be found for sale in Swansea market), north Devon and Yorkshire have good records of the use of this seaweed as a frequent food item, but it seldom made it on to big city menus, an exception being in the early twentieth century, when it was sent to major towns as a dilettante novelty. Repeated attempts to provide it to a regular, wider clientele have mostly failed.

Again, this is due partly to its appearance, but also partly to the flavour, of which a writer to the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* in 1929 said, ‘People either like it very much or not at all.’ My own view fits in well with this, as I always say that it tastes of a fishy Marmite. In fact, it is nowhere near as strong a flavour as Marmite, and another writer got it just right in describing it as olive and oyster. It is certainly an acquired taste. I don’t think anyone would, or should, sit down to a plate of cooked Laver. With this seaweed, how it is used is everything.

Before anything remotely appetising can be made from fresh Laver it must be washed and cooked. It requires a great deal of washing to remove dirt, grit, the odd sand shrimp and occasional top-shell. (For details on how to do this see p. 56.) Cooking Laver is a marathon. I once asked a lady minding the laverbread and cockle stall in Swansea market how long it takes. ‘Ten hours,’ she said. I have cooked it many, many times, and she is quite right. I use a preserving pan and cover the Laver in a few inches of water, put on the lid, bring it to the boil and leave it on the lowest possible simmer for eight and a half hours, stirring every twenty minutes or so. I then remove the lid and raise the heat a little and stir much more frequently. Once it has reduced to a paste, it is cooked. There are a couple of alternatives – overnight in a slow cooker set on ‘low’, or an hour sat in a heatproof bowl in a pressure cooker set on ‘high’. In both cases you will need to do a bit more cooking and stirring to break down the structure to form the required paste. However you make it, this paste is called

laverbread. Nothing to do with loaves of bread, ‘bread’ being an old word for food (as in ‘Give us this day our daily bread’).

The classic, and probably the best, way of using it is in laverbread oatmeal cakes. My favourite way is to mix oatmeal and Laver in equal volumes with chopped, well-cooked streaky bacon and make it into little cakes which are fried in the bacon fat. This is a breakfast that will keep you full until 3 p.m., and one of my favourites. Laver is moderately famous as a sauce for mutton or lamb, the Laver being mixed with a little oil and lemon juice. It also goes well with most fish dishes, oyster being the most appropriate. I have yet to try the Hebridean delicacy of Laver soup, which is laverbread stirred into hot milk, and long may this blessed state continue.

Laver is found all around our shore, but it does need a suitable beach. This is usually a rocky shore, but Laver is a frequent inhabitant of harbours, where it attaches to piers and jetties. Scissors are a must for collecting Laver. If you pull it away, you will, obviously, be removing the whole thing, but you are also certain to bring the tiny holdfast by which it attaches to the rock. The attachment is a very good one, so you will also bring a tiny bit of that rock with the holdfast. Removing these tooth-breaking pieces from picked Laver is a long and tedious process. May is the earliest time that it is generally found in any quantity, but if you wait until later in the year, the fronds will be much larger.

Lime *Tilia* spp.

MALVACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr **May** Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

I have been suitably vague in writing just the single word ‘Lime’. There are a handful of species in Britain, and the matter is confused with hybrids, so I will stick to just a single word. This is unremarkable, but what came as a shock to me is the discovery that the Limes have been evicted from their ancestral home in the Tiliaceae, and unceremoniously moved to the Malvaceae. Lime trees, it seems, are a type of mallow. This is the work of the Angiosperm Phylogeny Group, which has systematically upset every botanist in the world by using genetic techniques to discover the true

relationships between the flowering plants and by moving entire genera from one family to another and other such mischief. This is as it should be, provided the new understandings are accurate. We will just have to get used to it.

The leaves of most trees are generally not edible unless you are a goat or a giraffe. They are too tough, too bitter or plain poisonous. I have mentioned Beech leaves and Blackthorn leaves for some alcoholic infusions, but nothing for a salad. Lime leaves are the best of a bad bunch, with the added benefit of actually looking edible. The mature leaves are too tough, but shiny, pale-green young leaves are thin and soft. There is not much flavour, and the texture is mucilaginous, the latter character being unusual in tree species and a clear connection with its fellow mallows. Though a picky eater, I don’t mind them, and will grab one or two from the pollarded street trees while on my way to Dorchester market.

Oar Weed *Laminaria digitata* and allies

PHAEOPHYCEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The kelps (the general encompassing name for the larger Phaeophyceae) are around all year, though at their best and most accessible during the warmer months. They are well known to swimmers, who become entwined in their fronds and dragged down to a watery doom. That, at least, is the thought that comes to me whenever I find myself in a kelp forest while retrieving a crab pot. These forests form rich habitats around most of our rocky coasts. Many species of seaweed and invertebrates grow on their surfaces, and they give shelter to and cover for many animals. Even their holdfasts are of ecological interest, creating a specialist micro-ecosystem for invertebrates.

The tops of these forests are often seen at low tide: the blades, no longer floating upright in deep water, float on the sea surface, sometimes with their bent stipes visible. The blades of all three mentioned here are in the form of a large, flat, cut-out of a hand, though with long fingers. The stipe of Oar Weed is oval in cross-section, and the holdfast like a mangrove root and differentiated from the often larger Forest Kelp, *L. hyperborea*, which possesses a cylindrical stipe. It is impossible to confuse Furbellows, *Saccorhiza polyschides*, with anything, as it has a flat, ribbon-like stipe which forms a wide ruff (or bellows) near the large holdfast, which is the form of an inverted cup.

The forager seldom needs to collect kelp in any great quantity, its uses in the kitchen being important but limited. Therefore it makes sense to remove the odd finger or two, leaving the rest of it to continue its job. In fact, it is possible to collect more than enough from specimens that have been dislodged and stranded on the beach.

My next-door neighbour is now used to seeing a row of kelp pegged to my washing line – though I notice she has recently erected a two-metre fence. They reconstitute very quickly and well, so this is the best way of preserving kelps, which are seldom used fresh. Provided the weather stays dry, all will be fine, and do not worry about the fine white powder that forms on the drying surfaces: it will be salt and sugars. A further dry to almost crispiness in the oven will allow you to blitz them in a blender into

kelp powder. This is extremely useful in the kitchen as a provider of salt and umami flavour. It is very high in iodine, an essential (if small) constituent of our diet and one that is sometimes deficient. For more on seaweed powders see p. 54.

If kelps have one famous usage it is in *dashi*. This is a stock made from shavings of *katsuobushi* (smoked, dried tuna) and *kombu* – which is another kelp, usually *Laminaria japonica*. The tuna and seaweed are brought slowly to the boil, then the heat is turned off and the whole left for three hours to cool and infuse. There are various alternative methods and ingredients. A vegan version can be made by replacing the tuna with dried shiitake mushrooms, or one of the mushrooms in this book. You can buy *kombu* from oriental delicatessens for £50 a kilo, or collect it at the bargain price of nothing a ton from the beach.

Of course, you can just steam strips of fresh kelp fronds, but it would be used just for its decorative purpose, and in fairly small quantities.

Pepper Dulse *Osmundea pinnatifida* and allies

RHODOPHYTA

The species group around Pepper Dulse is difficult for the amateur phycologist, though it matters little as they are all edible and of similar flavour and texture. They all look a little like ferns or flattened Christmas trees, with an overall triangular shape and alternate arrangement of ‘branches’. Pepper Dulse is quite small, seldom reaching 7.5 cm long, while Royal Fern-Weed, *O. osmunda*, is much longer, at up to 20 cm including its long stem. There is at least one other species, False Pepper Dulse, *O. hybrida*, which is of similar shape but with a round cross-section to the branches rather than flat as with the former two.

The flavour of these species is of fish and cucumber, not an altogether unpleasant combination. They are also, as expected, peppery, though only for some people, it seems. Some will notice it immediately, but I, and others, cannot taste it at all. What everyone seems to be agreed upon is that it is a very good edible seaweed and possibly the only one that can be, needs to be, enjoyed raw.

The species mentioned occur all around the British Isles, often draped on the sides of rocks. Despite all these species being referred to as ‘dulse’, they are only very distantly related to Dulse, *Palmaria palmata*. This sort of thing is very annoying, isn’t it?

Scots Pine *Pinus sylvestris* and allies

PINACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

While I am perfectly normal, some of my fellow foragers are decidedly odd. Charming, good-looking, intelligent and kind, yes, but also odd. I went to see one of them in Bedfordshire a couple of years ago. Richard greeted me with a large cup of tea. But no ordinary tea was this. It was, effectively, a hot, Pine-needle smoothie. Good manners are everything, so I said how interesting it was and not actually unpleasant. It was interesting – the taste of Pine forests was there, but so, inexplicably, was that of cooked mussels. Richard said that it was good for me, and no doubt he was right. A fondness

for making Pine-needle smoothies does, I admit, not qualify anyone as odd, but a diet almost entirely consisting of goat's milk from his own flock certainly does. Usually it is just the milk that he drinks, but frequently he ups its nutritional value by making a smoothie with any wild plant that, in his words, 'isn't actually poisonous'. Living the dream.

Young Pine and Spruce needles are surprisingly useful for their fresh flavour and perfume. The new growth – terminal buds in Spruce and upright candles in Pine are the best parts, though new-growth needles will work too. I have used Pine needles in a beer, adding it to the boil five minutes before 'copper off'. Pine- or Spruce-flavoured toffee is another of my specialities, the Pine or Spruce being placed in in a muslin bag and dropped into the boiling toffee ten minutes before the set is reached.

Another friend, Agnieszka, gave me a bottle of something sticky made by her grandmother. It was the remains of what had presumably been a very large batch of Pine-needle cough medicine, cut back with vodka. I have made a great number of infusions over the years, but this sweet, syrupy forest-in-a-bottle was one of the best. I kept that bottle on my desk for over

a year, taking a blessed sip whenever I needed a kick-start. I have not been able to extract the recipe from Agnieszka's grandmother, but my own is to boil the 'candles' – the young, upright tufts of needles that appear in April or May – or the immature, green cones that appear in June, in a strong sugar syrup for fifteen minutes. I empty the entire, cooled, contents of the pan into a jar and seal it. After two weeks I add the vodka.

One very unusual crop that can be collected in surprisingly large quantities from Pines is the pollen. Just when the new growth of needles appear, male cones form and, when ripe, produce clouds of pollen when disturbed. To collect it, carefully place a plastic bag over a cone and tap to displace the pollen. It has little flavour but is interesting, and has gained a reputation as a super-food. There seem to be few ailments it does not alleviate or prevent, but the two that caught my eye, and which seem to have some scientific basis, are its anti-ageing properties and maintenance of testosterone levels.

Before you set out looking for needles of any sort, do be aware of the deadly Yew tree (see p. 360). If you wish to be safe, and the identification of gymnosperms is not in your CV, I suggest sticking with Pine, because, with its long, long needles, it is so distinctively unlike Yew. Even though Spruce is readily recognised (it is after all, the Christmas tree), the needles are similar to those of Yew, and a remote possibility of confusion does exist.

Sea Purslane *Atriplex portulacoides*

CHENOPODIACEAE

Sea Purslane has never been particularly popular, and if it has ever had a hey-day it is now, in the more experimental kitchens of restaurants that strive to impress. In the nineteenth century it was pickled as a caper substitute and found service as an occasional ingredient in salad, but no more than that. The leaves are small and succulent, and possess a flavour that is overwhelmingly of salt. But succulence and saltiness are welcome at dinner, provided they are not alone. Very quickly sautéed or boiled, or even raw, they can be sprinkled on just about any dish, though fish is the most appropriate. Their firm flesh also makes them suitable as a pesto ingredient, albeit in small quantities. Other possibilities I have tried (and enjoyed) are

Sea Purslane hummus and Sea Purslane dahl, the leaves chopped and added to the otherwise complete dishes. The very least that could be said for this plant is that it will do no harm in any dish requiring salt.

If you like Sea Purslane, then you are lucky indeed. Wherever in England and Wales there is low-lying land adjacent to salt marsh, there is likely to be Sea Purslane, sometimes covering many acres. In Scotland you will not be so fortunate, as it can be found only on the coast of Dumfries and Galloway.

Sea Rocket *Cakile maritima*

BRASSICACEAE

Sea Rocket is one of the many plants I am thrilled to see, every time. It should never be unexpected, as it has a distinct habitat: sand dunes or sandy upper shores. Here it can form dense patches, often mixed up with other edible species.

The plant is unmistakable, with typical lobed leaves familiar from the commercially available rocket but, being in the harsh, drying environment of the beach, much more succulent. If it is in flower, it is even easier to identify. The flowers are pink and with the four petals typical of the cabbage family. It is found all the way around our shores wherever there is a suitable habitat.

It is great fun (for me) to pick a leaf for any friends or foragers present who have never tried it before. I will not stand for any coy nibbling, but insist that they pop the whole thing in their mouth. To say it is a powerful taste is a great understatement, as the flavour is like that of wasabi but puts that iceberg lettuce of a plant into the shade. Not to everyone’s taste and not to be eaten in great quantity, but a revelation for the more adventurous.

Spear-Leaved Orache *Atriplex prostrata* and allies

CHENOPODIACAEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Spear-Leaved Orache is my favourite weed. It appears in cultivated ground and odd corners throughout the UK and is very common in coastal locations. In Scotland and Wales it never strays far from the sea. It is particularly fond of nitrogen-rich land, and one of the biggest populations I ever saw was the year after a sewage pipe burst under a nature reserve. Next year, the ground was thick with particularly large and succulent specimens, though somehow I could not bring myself to pick any.

Spear-Leaved Orache is frequently accompanied by one or more fellow members of the Chenopodiacaeae, the Goosefoot family. Many of the native ‘Goosefoots’ are edible, and Spear-Leaved Orache is one of the best,

alongside Fat Hen (see p. 141), another common weed of cultivation. Most of them are the devil to identify, with individual species looking quite different from plant to plant and from young to old. All produce tall spikes of tiny and inconspicuous flowers, and it is to these one must look (through a lens) for a firm identification. Fortunately, Spear-Leaved Orache is distinct in having large, flat, triangular leaves. As the plant's specific epithet, *prostrata*, suggests, it is generally a sprawling plant, but sometimes it takes on a more upright aspect.

Perhaps because of its name, Good King Henry is better known than Spear-Leaved Orache, with which it is often confused. The former, although edible, is relatively rare, and I have never found it for certain. Other, much more common, related species are Goosefoot, Many-Seeded Goosefoot, Red Goosefoot and Grass-Leaved Orache, the last one a frequent inhabitant of the upper seashore.

The leaves of Spear-Leaved Orache and its allies are very similar in taste and texture to spinach, which is no surprise because all are Goosefoots. Like spinach, a huge bag of Spear-Leaved Orache will shrink dramatically

on cooking, so do pick four times as much as you think you will need. No need to worry: it is, after all, a weed.

Sugar Kelp *Saccharina latissima*

PHAEOPHYCEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Unlike its multi-fingered brothers, Sugar Kelp has a single blade, attached to a relatively short, cylindrical stipe. The blade is known to everyone as being spear-shaped, frequently very long, dimpled in the middle and wavy/crinkly at the edges. The dimples are employed to cause turbulence as the water passes over the blade, continually presenting the surface with fresh seawater. Like the other kelps, it too will make *kombu*, but young specimens can also be used fresh to make seaweed crisps. Never overcook seaweed crisps, as the smell and taste are truly horrible. Dried blades can turn almost white with a coating of salt and sugar, and it is worth licking a bit to see. The sugar is the polysaccharide mannitol.

It is a common species, and you may not need to pick any as there are often a few detached specimens stranded on the beach.

Sweet Gale *Myrica gale*

MYRICACEAE

Sweet Gale, also known as ‘Bog Myrtle’, is a plant I think of as quite common, but it is only common in the now relatively rare habitat of, you guessed it, bogs, and also wet heathland and moorland. Such habitats exist in my favourite foraging haunts of west Dorset, the New Forest and north-west Scotland, thus colouring my view of this plant. It is counted as ‘near threatened’, an odd term which in this case means its habitat is threatened.

Despite this, I would have no hesitation in removing a few leaves and catkins from the odd plant. Personal foraging would never damage the plant: only draining the land, ploughing it for grass, digging for peat and/or planting Christmas trees on it will do that. In addition to my foraging haunts, Sweet Gale is found in southwest and north-west Wales, Cumbria and south-west Scotland, and is a scattered rarity elsewhere.

Where it *is* found, it has the appearance of a diminutive forest, with perhaps thousands of plants to be seen. It is usually a short shrub, though it can reach 1.8 m or more in height. The leaves are thick, long, oval and tapering towards the stem. They have a slight frosted appearance and a serrated edge. The stems are red, as are the mature catkins.

Having collected your handful of leaves and catkins, what is to be done with them? Sweet Gale is used for its strong fragrance, much as Pine needles are. This flavour is difficult to describe, though I think that my fellow forager and brewer Andy Hamilton has it about right with ‘mouthwash’, though not the minty kind. It was once a key ingredient in gruit, an ancient ale, before hops were used. It fell out of favour because hops simply taste much nicer and Sweet Gale acquired a reputation for

supplying headaches above and beyond those which normally result from too much beer. I have used it to make a gruit, along with Ling (Heather) and a few other wild ingredients, and found it surprisingly good, and with no headaches. The amount used is very small, at only 20 to 30 grains (1 or 2 g) of dried leaves for a 25-litre batch.

On p. 189 I mention the use of Wormwood in making a vermouth. It requires additional aromatic herbs in the infusing spirit, and Sweet Gale fits the bill nicely. I have yet to try the trick of placing a layer of leaves beneath a cake case (see Hop, on p. 114), prior to baking a sponge, and my plans for a Sweet Gale toffee are also pending, but it is always good to have plans.

A final warning. Sweet Gale was once used to terminate pregnancies, and it probably worked. It is doubtful that the minute quantities you are likely to use would have such an effect, but expectant mothers should avoid the plant.

Sweet Vernal Grass *Anthoxanthum odoratum*

POACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

One of my more odd friends decided to try a diet of grass for a week. It did not go well – as anyone could have told him, had he asked. So why have I included a grass in this book about wild food? Sweet Vernal Grass is one of the more aromatic grasses, full of the smell of a freshly cut meadow. It is this flavour/aroma that the plant is used for, the grass itself remaining unconsumed. There are two main methods of extraction: a water infusion (tea!) and – you guessed it – vodka.

The flavour comes mostly from coumarin. This is moderately toxic, causing kidney and liver problems in high doses, very unlikely to be achieved in a couple of glasses of infused vodka. However, it is best avoided by those of a delicate disposition or by expectant and nursing mothers. It may help reassure you that coumarin is a fairly common component of food plants and is tolerated by food-regulating bodies, which merely set an upper limit on how much to use (see p. 186 for more details).

There is a famous Polish vodka called Żubrówka which is also a grass infusion, this time of Holy Grass (*Hierochloe odorata*), otherwise known as Bison Grass. This grass is rare in Britain, found only in a few scattered locations in Scotland (Galloway and Orkney being minor strongholds). Sweet Vernal Grass Vodka is very similar, and some experts consider the grasses to be in the same genus, giving Holy Grass the name *Anthoxanthum nitens*. Sweet Vernal Grass is extremely common, being found almost everywhere from the Channel Islands to Shetland.

It will come as no surprise to hear that Sweet Vernal Grass is a grassland species; however, it does require *good* grassland, not a recent ley. Good grassland is permanent grassland, where grasses not usually sown for agricultural purposes have time to establish. Sweet Vernal Grass prefers damp, but not saturated, ground.

Not many people can readily identify any grasses at all, so it is fortunate that Sweet Vernal Grass is conspicuous and unmistakable. It also grows in loose tufts, making it easier to spot (and cut). It is a short grass, at about 50 cm. Halfway up the stem there is a single small leaf, with fine hairs at the base. The most noticeable characteristic, at least in younger plants, is the dark and generally cylindrical immature flower head.

I collect a couple of kilos of Sweet Vernal Grass every year, most of it destined for a vodka infusion. I have even bought a sickle for the purpose, made by my blacksmith friend Dave. I am very proud of it. The grass is most visible with the light behind it, so I will spot a promisingly dense clump and proceed to grab as much as I can with one hand while reaping with the other.

To make the vodka, gently pack a sealable jar with the fresh grass, fill with vodka, seal and leave for two weeks. Much longer than this will introduce a bitterness to your drink. Decant into bottles and, as with Żubrówka, add a single stem for authenticity. If you find it too strong, then 'dilute' it with more vodka. The traditional cocktail is one part of the vodka to two parts fresh apple juice. I have recently tried one part of the vodka with five parts of crab apple vodka (see p. 270) and served with soda or lemonade – or cider. There is also the possibility of using it in one of the recipes I mention for Sweet Woodruff (p. 185).

Watercress *Rorippa nasturtium-aquaticum*

BRASSICACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

For some reason there was once much drama surrounding Watercress. A brief survey of court reports and other contemporary records of the first half of the nineteenth century found two unfortunates arrested for selling Watercress (cases dismissed by magistrates as vexatious), two thefts of Watercress – one a basket, the other from someone's farm – the mugging (with a heavy rock) of some poor fellow peacefully picking Watercress, two cases of Watercress sellers dying of destitution, two men transported for life for killing and stealing a lamb which they hid in a basket under some Watercress, a father who accidentally caused the demise of his three children by picking what he thought was Watercress but wasn't, and a girl

who blew her head off with a gun while out picking the stuff. On a more cheerful note, but still dramatic, one ‘Watercress Jack’, of Springhead in Kent, found a scattered Roman hoard when preparing his Watercress bed and a Roman bath while building his shed.

Unfortunately, while resisting the temptation to purloin someone else’s Watercress (or sheep) and avoiding the carrying of guns while foraging for *anything* will keep you out of much trouble, you are not entirely safe. There are two serious problems that face the modern collector of Watercress: picking the wrong plant and picking plants contaminated with liver fluke.

Several water plants have been mistaken for Watercress, the commonest and least serious of which is Fool’s Watercress. This has a similar growth habit, looks vaguely like Watercress and shares the same habitat and often entwines itself with its more edible companion. I have known people complain that their Watercress soup tasted, oddly, of carrots; Fool’s Watercress is in the carrot family and does indeed taste strongly of carrots. Fortunately it is completely harmless; it is just the wrong plant and flavour. Far worse is Hemlock Water-Dropwort (p. 355). You have to be a truly terrible botanist to pick it by mistake, but evidently there are (or at least, were) some terrible botanists in the world.

You will probably be able to recognise wild Watercress because it is exactly the same species as cultivated watercress. For the record, however, it is a tall plant, growing to 2 m, the leaves composed of rounded leaflets with shallow lobes around their edge and arranged more or less opposite, plus a larger, rounder terminal leaflet. The flowers are white and four-petalled. They taste of Watercress, of course, unlike Fool's Watercress. Fool's Watercress has more pointed leaflets, with a more serrated edge, the terminal leaf is not round but more like a maple leaf, and the white flowers are formed in small umbels.

The liver fluke, *Fasciola hepatica*, is endemic to Britain and is the second of the problems assailing Watercress pickers. It has a complex life cycle that involves no fewer than eight stages, three of which take place inside an aquatic snail, ending with the adult stage in sheep and cattle. The stage that causes an infection is the tiny metacercaria, which form cysts on water plants and which are then eaten by animals, including, of course, humans. The adult fluke ends up in the bile ducts and, since no one wants anything in their bile duct other than bile, creates havoc. Fascioliasis, as the resultant disease is known, can be fatal in humans and may be misdiagnosed due to its rarity in the developed world.

In the unlikely event that you are still interested in collecting wild Watercress (the cultivated version is kept clear of flukes), you will be wondering how to avoid having 3-cm-long flatworms cheerfully sitting in your liver. The metacercaria are too small to be seen without a strong lens or an examining microscope, and I always maintain that, if you feel the need to examine your dinner under a microscope before eating it, it is time to reconsider the path your life has taken.

The most reliable way is to cook it, as the heat kills the offending organism. This precludes salads, obviously, but also the peppery flavour, which is quickly lost. Watercress soup, at least, may be salvaged from this if you add it to your stock base right at the end of cooking, preserving the hot flavour almost intact. The same principle applies to Watercress dumplings.

Though marginally less reliable than cooking, blanching is believed to kill the metacercaria while retaining the flavour and at least some of the crispiness. Drop the cress into fast-boiling water, stir, then immediately lift it out and drop into iced water. Chlorine-based salad sterilisers may also work.

If you really want that crispy salad, then avoid Watercress growing anywhere near cattle or sheep. It is also helpful to choose fast-moving streams without muddy banks, which harbour the offending dwarf pond snail, *Galba truncatula*. Collecting before the end of May, when the metacercaria are less abundant, may help, as will picking leaves that are well out of the water.

Watercress is an inhabitant of slow-moving streams and occurs throughout Britain. It comes and goes rather, appearing in abundance one year and disappearing the next, presumably an effect of flooding. Sometimes it is replaced entirely by Fool's Watercress. Wherever it occurs it tends to do so in huge quantities and it is possible to pick a bin-liner full of the plant in minutes. Watercress is very easily uprooted, so do use scissors to cut what you need. The clustered flower heads are the best parts to collect.

Watermint *Mentha aquatic* and allies

LAMIACEAE

A walk through water meadows, along damp pathways or a little too close to a stream, will often be accompanied by the incongruous smell of toothpaste. The culprit, or benefactor, is Watermint, one of the commonest and least appreciated of all our wild foods.

It grows throughout Britain, save only the more remote parts of the Scottish Highlands. It is an easy plant to recognise, with the gentle peppermint smell alone being sufficient. The furry, bronze-green/purple leaves, bright pink/purple flowers and the square stem (common to all mints, indeed all members of the Lamiaceae) make it unmistakable. The plant is at its easiest to find when in full flower, which won't be until high summer. Watermint has a long season – from late March through to mid-November – but by late September the flavour takes on a turpentine undertone, so early is best.

There are several other mint species, and most of them are reproductively adventurous, embarking on hybridisation sprees that make identification all but impossible. But if you have a mint before you, the only

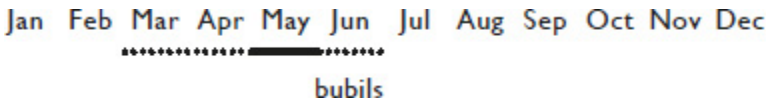
consideration is flavour. Peppermint is one such hybrid – between Watermint and Spearmint – and it occurs wild occasionally, notably in Scotland. Spearmint itself (a true species, *M. spicata*) can also be found occasionally, and I have been picking the stuff in a country lay-by for some years. These are probably garden escapees, as common garden mint is a cultivar of Spearmint. Corn Mint, *M. arvensis*, is the dry-land version of Watermint and is found occasionally in fields, or at least around field edges.

Members of the mint family have long been used to aid digestion – which is why we end up with a mint on top of our bill at restaurants. An exceptionally good use of Watermint to this end is in a sorbet with lemon. It makes a superb course after a heavy dinner, and before, or instead of, dessert. As with most things, a vodka infusion can be made with mint as a cocktail base. Apart from that, there is mint ice cream, mint and pea soup,

and, if you must, mint tea. Spearmint, however, has always been a trial to the cook as it tastes *exactly* like toothpaste.

Wild Onion *Allium vineale*

ALLIOIDEAE



May is the best time to collect Wild Onion, although it is most easily located in the winter, when its slightly blue/green tufts are clearly visible above the dormant grass on roadsides and other rough grassland. Later, it passes without notice because it looks just like grass. I once did a radio phone-in and was asked to solve a mystery that had puzzled the caller for years. ‘Why’, he asked, ‘can I smell onions every time I mow the lawn?’

Those winter leaves are just about usable as chives, provided you don’t mind your chives a bit tough and rather tasteless.

The bulbs are at their fattest in May; after that, the plants use their energy to produce the flowers and bulbils.

The main bulbs are 7.5 to 10 cm below the soil surface, and any attempt to pull them up is doomed to failure – you need to dig, getting your trowel underneath them. You will need permission from the landowner for this activity. Or you do it very quietly. It thus involves a considerable amount of hard work for the amount of onion you end up with, but the plant comes into its own on camping trips or when you want to impress your friends with an entirely wild dinner party which would suffer irredeemably for lack of onion – although bear in mind that it has more than a hint of garlic.

Perhaps the best, and certainly the easiest, part to eat is the succulent bulbils (vegetative reproductive structures – basically tiny plant bulbs) that form around the flower head. Provided you pick them young, they are useful in pesto as they are quite crunchy. Or you can use them as ‘micro-onions’ in a pickle.

One final warning about Wild Onion (also known as ‘Crow Garlic’): beware of confusing it with any of the garden plants of the lily family, as many of these are poisonous. The strong smells of onion/garlic when bruised will assure you that you are on the right track.

Wild Onion is largely a southern species; north of Birmingham, it is confined chiefly to the coast. Even in the south it prefers coastal locations, but is also frequently found inland. The plant has narrow leaves, like chives, but a darker, slightly blue/green colour. The bulbs are white, up to 1.5 cm in diameter, attached to a long, narrow white stem which runs into the leaves at ground level.

Much put-upon farmers have eradicated Wild Onion from pastoral land, where it was once a terrible pest. In the nineteenth century, people frequently complained in the newspaper of foul-tasting butter – garlic butter evidently not being popular at the time.

Wood Sorrel *Oxalis acetosella*

OXALIDACEAE

Wood Sorrel is one of our most common and widespread herbs. Several species of *Oxalis* occur here, but *O. acetosella* is the only native. As the name indicates, it is a plant of woodland, and it cares little about what type of wood. If you wish to collect a large amount, however, I suggest Spruce and Pine plantations, where it forms massive carpets. It is easily cropped, using sideways scissors, without collecting unwanted grasses and herbs. It has a rather patchy distribution, but is relatively scarce only in central-eastern areas of England, with Cambridgeshire being almost bereft.

Wood Sorrel is more delicate in its ‘grape-skin’ flavour and in appearance than its unrelated namesake, Common Sorrel. And so it is invariably used as a fresh and attractive addition to a salad. Although the leaves are cut complete with their red stems, the flowers and the small tuberous roots are also edible. Spring, when the young leaves and stems are succulent, is the best time to pick, though in truth the plant is available all year.

Despite containing the poisonous oxalic acid that provides both its generic name and its flavour, Wood Sorrel is safe to eat in all but industrial quantities. It is also a very easy plant to identify, with only the harmless clover being a vague lookalike. The stems are noticeably red, and in spring it produces some very pretty flowers, which are flushed with pink and have darker pink veins.

Yarrow *Achillea millefolium*

ASTERACEAE

Yarrow is a plant that has spent more time in the apothecary's shop than in the kitchen, credited as it is with a larger than usual number of medicinal properties for a small herb. It is believed to encourage a fever (or, rather, raise an existing fever so that it is all over much quicker), to have anti-bacterial qualities, to stimulate digestion, and to tone the blood vessels, whatever that means. Its most famous use, however, is to stem bleeding. Its generic name, *Achillea*, originates in its presumed use to staunch the blood from the heel of Achilles. Some of its colloquial names, such as the Somerset 'woundwort' and the Scottish 'staunch-gris' (staunch-grass), confirm this. Somerset has another name for the plant, one that is also used elsewhere: 'nosebleed'. If you grab a bunch and stuff it up your nose, it will stop bleeding. Yes, I know, you can stop a nosebleed by stuffing anything up your nose, but Yarrow does seem to have extra properties (perhaps the large surface area of the leaves) that promote coagulation, enabling it to be incorporated into a dressing.

Its traditional culinary uses have reached little beyond a not very pleasant herbal tea and, much more interesting, a bittering herb used in the manufacture of gruit – a type of ale used before hops were invented. It is this bitterness that kept it out of the hands of chefs, overwhelming the pleasant aromas evident in a crushed leaf. But picked young and used carefully at low temperatures, the sweeter, more delicate flavours, such as anise, win through. Finely chopped, the leaves and flowers can be sprinkled on a finished dish. They can be blended with a neutral oil and strained out after a week to make Yarrow oil. Recently I took my distiller friend Luke (I choose my friends carefully) for a walk to find some new herbs for his gin. He was immediately attracted to the complex aroma of Yarrow flowers and, that very day, made eleven bottles of a superb Yarrow gin.

Yarrow grows almost everywhere in Britain. The feathery basal leaves are very distinctive, and the umbel-like spray of white flowers mimics the

true umbels of members of the carrot family. These flowers, which can be used just like the leaves, form on a long flower spike which is graced with smaller versions of the leaves.

JUNE

June provides some of my personal wild food favourites. The Japanese Rose, Gooseberry, Marsh Samphire and the relatively uncommon but superb Wild Rocket. However, things are changing already, with only a third of the species described in May. Much can still be found continuing from earlier months, and there is one species in the general monthly list that looks forward. It is the Horse Mushroom, which is sometimes found early in wet summers and worth looking out for.

Elder (flowers)
Gooseberry
Japanese Rose (flowers)
Marsh Samphire
Perennial Wall Rocket
Sweet Woodruff
Wild Marjoram and allies
Wild Strawberry
Wormwoods

Also found

Annual Sea-Blite
Bittercresses
Black Garden Ant and allies
Blackthorn (leaves)
Carragheen and allies
Chickweed
Common Mallow
Dabberlocks (and Wakame)
Dulse
Fat Hen
Fennel
Field Mushroom
Garden Snail
Gutweed
Horse Mushroom and allies (just a chance in a wet summer!)
Horseradish
Juniper (mostly green berries)
Laver
Mugwort
Oak Moss
Oar Weed and allies
Opium Poppy and allies
Pepper Dulse and allies
Pignut (last chance in early June!)
Rock Samphire
Sea Beet
Sea Kale (flowers and immature pods)
Sea Purslane
Sea Rocket
Sea Spaghetti
Serrated Wrack and allies
Silverweed

Spear-Leaved Orache
Sugar Kelp
Sweet Cicely (leaves and immature pods)
Sweet Gale
Sweet Vernal Grass
Watercress
Watermint and allies
Wild Onion (bulbils)
Wood Sorrel
Yarrow

Elder *Sambucus nigra*

ADOXACEAE

We all have our favourite wild foods, our favourite flavours. Mine is the Elderflower. It is with great excitement that I look forward to 1 June, which I always consider to be the start of their season. Occasionally they are hard to find at that time, but they are usually around from the third or fourth week of May, and one year, 2017, I found a fully laden tree during the third week of April! The latter break in normal service was due to the very dry spring, which brought everything forward. Whenever the Elder comes into full bloom I suggest picking as much as you can in the first couple of weeks or you will find yourself desperately driving around the countryside in mid-July, picking a few flowers here and there.

The Elder is found everywhere in Britain, save some of the more remote parts of the Scottish Highlands. Odd trees spring up quickly on rough ground, both urban and rural, but chiefly it is a tree of scrub, wood edges and, most commonly, hedgerows. Those who tend hedges never plant Elder, because of its tendency to overwhelm its neighbouring Hawthorn and Blackthorn, then dying and leaving a gap. Nevertheless, it will take up uninvited residence in a hedge courtesy of birds. On a well-cared-for farm these interlopers will be removed, though they are frequently tolerated near farm gateways.

The Elder is a very easy tree to recognise, especially when in flower or berry. Unfortunately, the inexperienced forager sometimes jumps to conclusions and picks any flower that looks as though it *might* be an Elderflower. White or creamy white sprays of flowers, like those of the Elder, are very common. So it is that Elderflower sparkling wine has been made with Rowan, Wayfaring Tree, Whitebeam and Dogwood flowers, with the resulting drink tasting of cat's pee. The even more botanically challenged have been known to use Hogweed flowers, and I once spoke to someone who had been quite ill from what I suspect to have been Hemlock sparkly!

The leaves are pinnate: that is, composed of leaflets which are immediately opposite each other on a stem. There is a terminal leaflet at the end, and all the leaflets have a serrated edge. The real and rather obvious giveaway, however, is that the flowers smell strongly of Elderflowers. This is utterly unmistakable, though it can vary from tree to tree, sometimes being more lemony than usual.

Pick on a warm, dry day (warm, still evenings are best), selecting those on which all of the florets are open and all with a creamy yellow centre. If they are going a bit grey or the petals are falling off, it is too late. Use them as soon as you can, as they do not keep well. Invariably, the florets need to be detached from their stems because these green parts are bitter. Hold the flower by the stem between thumb and forefinger, with the floret end lying in the palm of your hand. Comb off the florets with a dinner fork, holding it almost parallel to the direction of stroke. The operation is a bit hard on the palm, but you only start to draw blood after 200 de-flowerings.

Old attitudes to our edible wild plants are rather odd. Most historic recommendations for use are of a medicinal nature, with no consideration of the kitchen. The Elderflower's virtues were in promoting mild perspiration, as an expectorant and to reduce fevers. Before the twentieth century, the main use of Elderflowers was as a facial wash to preserve the fine complexion of ladies. The *Linlithgowshire Gazette* in 1897 provided a helpful recipe for 'Virgin's Milk' – half a pint of Elderflower water mixed with one drachm of friar's balsam. Elderflower wine was made during the Victorian period, but the flower was also known as an adulterant of wine, typically Muscat, in a period long before trading standards were thought of. 'Adulterant' is rather a harsh word in this instance, as several contemporary commentators regarded it is an improver of the dubious wines to which Britain was subjected in those days.

We are much more adventurous today, and countless professional chefs, food writers and individuals work tirelessly to invent new recipes. My own contribution to this is Elderflower Delight, a Turkish delight made with sugar, cornflour, gelatine and lemon, plus the flowers, which are added, in a muslin bag, two minutes from the end of the ferocious boil. It is more than worth the effort, and I make about 8 kg of it every year as it seems to disappear very quickly. Similarly, there is Elderflower and lemon sorbet and Elderflower cordial. The latter is a ridiculous price in the shops, and well worth making.

By far the best-known use for the flowers is in sparkling wine. This is superb if you get it right, and a truly lovely summer drink. Getting it wrong usually involves sparkling wine covering, and broken glass being embedded in, the walls and ceiling of your kitchen. The key to avoiding this lethal catastrophe is to bottle the wine in champagne bottles, and only when the

specific gravity is at 1005. (My apologies to those of you who haven't the faintest idea what I am talking about – it's winemaker talk.)

If you wish to preserve the florets, they can be dried, either alone or mixed with granulated sugar, though much of the perfume is lost. It is better to make cordial with just the flowers, omitting the lemon juice, which can be added when required. The cordial will last for a year or more, provided the sugar syrup is strong enough and it is kept well sealed in a bottle. Elderflower ice cream, panna cotta, cake, yoghurt, a jam with rhubarb or, better still, gooseberries can all be made from the fresh or preserved Elderflower.

In late August all the Elder trees that have not been stripped of their flowers will produce Elderberries. You need to be quite quick because birds love them, as anyone who has parked a car near an Elder in August or September will be able to tell you. Pick them fully ripe, with no or few green berries remaining and the whole spray of berries drooping a little.

They go bad quite quickly, so grab them as soon as you can. The berries too need to be forked off from multiple ‘stems’.

Elderberries can be used to make a species of Worcester sauce called pontac sauce, as recommended by Richard Mabey in his seminal *Food for Free*. You can make a fruit vinegar with them, as detailed in the Blackberry entry on p. 218. They can also form an ingredient of a fruit leather (see p. 370 for the recipe). What the berries are best known for is Elderberry wine, universally acknowledged as the finest of all country wines. The berries have just the right balance of acid and tannin, with some of the complex undertones that make a wine worthy of first prize at the village fête.

Gooseberry *Ribes uva-crispa*

ROSACEAE

Sometimes a little phenological knowledge is a great help to the forager. For most of the year you could walk up and down a Hawthorn hedge for hours without spotting a Gooseberry bush that is hiding there. The leaves of both plants are, well, green, and of vaguely similar shape. Even when it is in fruit, the Gooseberry does not shout its whereabouts, because the fruit is, of course, green too. Only in spring does it stand out and call ‘Here I am’, for the Gooseberry is the first shrub to come into leaf. It is always a few weeks earlier than hawthorn, blackthorn or hazel, and highly conspicuous against the browns of winter. A few non-native varieties of hawthorn with early leaf burst have slightly spoiled this trick, but it still works. By the time the fruit is ripe, the Gooseberry bush is invisible again, so do mark its location in some way.

The leaves are small and generally rounded, with three to five lobes. The flowers are inconspicuous and green, and the whole plant is spiny. Wild gooseberries are either native stock or escapees from cultivation, though the plant’s status as a native shrub is open to question, and I suspect they are all garden deserters. It is, nevertheless, fairly common and found throughout most of lowland Britain except the west of Scotland. The small berries are tart and very good, though seldom sweet.

Gooseberries are a much under-appreciated fruit, and difficult to find in the shops or markets nowadays. My two historic attempts to grow them went the same way as my attempt to grow asparagus – that is to say, dismally – so finding some that grow without heartbreak is a great pleasure to me. The wild species is seldom as prolific as its selected and pampered garden cousin. A writer in *The Scotsman* in 1914 noted ‘the wild gooseberry, eager in early spring to assume its green dress and put forth a promise of fruit that never come to harvest’. But sometimes you can be lucky. I find the occasional bush well hung with fruit, and in 1943, when any fruit was welcome, there was a report of the hedgerows being ‘heavily strung with berries’.

If a season like 1943 comes round again, then wild gooseberry fool, crumble and wine can all be yours. But there is a wild addition that can be made to any gooseberry dish: Elderflowers (p. 173). These two go together so perfectly that I would never eat gooseberries without their floral bride.

Japanese Rose *Rosa rugosa*

ROSACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

flowers & hips

As its common name suggests, this is a species from eastern Asia. It was introduced to Europe around 1800 and gradually gained popularity as a pretty, fragrant and vigorous garden rose, one that is still popular today, usually as a hedge. It is not, however, popular with naturalists, as it is now classified as an invasive species. In its homelands it was adapted to coastal dunes, and it is mostly northern European coasts that have become overwhelmed by the plant. England has suffered relatively little, with East Anglia and the northwest coast being the only areas where it is a serious problem. The Welsh and Scottish coasts have suffered too, and here it again makes a thorough nuisance of itself, outperforming native species with its dense, prickly thickets. It has naturalised inland too, notably in London and the lowland between Edinburgh and Glasgow. Overall, it has a northern and western distribution.

Ecological concerns aside, naturalised specimens of *Rosa rugosa* are a gift to the forager, who may pick truckloads of the stuff with a completely clear conscience. For those not blessed with a local naturalised population there is your garden or, more likely, someone else's garden. I have an arrangement with a few friends to pick a few flowers and hips from their plants in exchange for a taste or two of what I make with them. I am also not above quietly picking from car parks, municipal gardens and the odd roundabout, where the rose has become popular with the authorities. I am still waiting for a knock on the door regarding my recent excursion to the Radipole Lake car park in Weymouth.

Rosa rugosa bears two exceptional forageable products. First come the petals. These have a long season, starting in mid-June and ending in mid-September. Then, from late July, the rosehips are ripe and ready. These are enormous, about the size of a crab apple, enabling them to be cooked, candied, preserved or pickled, once the exceedingly hairy seeds have been scooped out. Their size means that it takes a tenth of the effort required for wild roses to collect enough for rosehip syrup. This syrup is perfectly passable, though not quite so fruity as that made from native roses. For more on rosehip syrup see the entry on Dog and Field Rose (p. 272).

The flowers come in pink or white (actually, it is an extremely pale pink) and are the most delightfully fragrant of all the roses – the pink usually more intense. They are simple flowers in that the corolla (the arrangement of petals) is a single layer, like those of our native roses.

The best time to pick them is when they are just opening. Ideally it should be in the evening of a warm, still, dry day, but provided they are not wet from dew or rain, all will be well. Give the flower a slight tap first to evict the bee that is very likely to be there, then grasp the petals as a whole and pull them away from the rest of the flower. It is worth keeping your petals in a closed plastic box for a few hours before using them, as the perfume continues to be produced even after picking.

While rose petals are perfectly edible – they can happily be included in a salad or sprinkled over a Middle Eastern dish – they are clearly not a food but a flavouring. I collect a huge quantity every year, most of which I infuse in a good-quality vodka. It is rather like drinking Eau de Cologne if you down it straight (we have all been in that dark place at one time or another), but used as a cocktail ingredient it is wonderful. One of my contributions to the cocktail canon is the Pink Pint – a long summer cocktail employing

rose-petal vodka, rosehip syrup, raspberry juice, homemade lemonade and ice. Many cocktails can be given a mysterious something when sprayed with rose-petal vodka from a bottle after the cocktail has been made. Preserving the aroma in vodka is an excellent way of making it available in your cooking when the petals are not to hand. Just stir a dessert-spoonful into your tagine or biryani before serving.

Rose water is easily made by crushing the petals and adding them to boiling water, covering, turning off the heat and leaving it to cool down. The strained rose water will last a week or two. A rose syrup is a longer-lived alternative, the petals mixed with sugar for a day, hot water poured over the mixture and stirred until the sugar has dissolved, then strained. Rose oil is more useful as it lasts indefinitely. Crush the petals and stir into a neutral-flavoured edible oil such as sunflower. Stand the covered container in very hot water and allow it all to cool slowly. Strain and bottle.

Drying is an alternative method of preservation, but it must be done at room temperature to retain the aroma.

Turkish delight made at home is as good as, and often better than, that bought in the shops (see Elderflower, p. 173). Cakes can be decorated with rose-flavoured icing, and rose flavouring can be added to a cake mix.

Marsh Samphire *Salicornia* spp.

CHENOPODIACEAE

There are three samphires in Britain: Rock Samphire, Golden Samphire and Marsh Samphire. They belong to three different families – carrot, daisy and goosefoot – and are thus only remotely related, sharing nothing more than long, thin, succulent leaves and a fondness for the seaside. Inevitably this has caused confusion, though if you asked a Victorian chef or naturalist they would assert that Rock Samphire is *the* samphire and the rest a lazy confusion. The use of Marsh Samphire as a prized food is fairly recent. The Victorians considered it a ‘very inferior’ substitute for Rock Samphire in a pickle.

Marsh Samphire itself comes in anything up to seven species. Since there is little hope of anyone but an expert botanist telling them apart, I will treat them as being all the same, but I must unhelpfully ask you to bear in mind that you may well be picking one of the rarer species.

It comes as a surprise to many people to discover that Marsh Samphire is a plant at all. Its unusual branching and highly succulent leaves and a clear habit of growing in the sea give it the appearance of a seaweed. It is also a flowering plant, though the flowers are truly tiny.

As a whole, Marsh Samphire is common around the British Isles wherever suitable habitats exist: mudflats, estuaries, muddy tidal gullies in maritime grassland, gravelly mud, brackish areas behind pebble beaches and so on. You will probably need wellington boots, and it is essential to check the tide before you set off. Scissors are also a necessity, as it is otherwise impossible to pick the plants without illegally uprooting them.

Pick with care, here and there, and be restrained, picking only what you need. The main threat to these species, apart from major loss of habitat, is trampling. At a Marsh Samphire spot I visit frequently, the wildlife trust in charge built a wooden bridge over the barren and muddy tidal strip where many people had wandered at low tide to get to the pebble beach. The very next year this area was green with Marsh Samphire.

Marsh Samphire is one of the few plants with a recognised, though not regulated, season. It begins on 21 June and ends whenever the plant is in too poor a condition to pick – usually the beginning of September.

There is another type of samphire that is related to the *Salicornia* species. It is Perennial Samphire, *Sarcocornia perennis*. It is almost identical to Marsh Samphire but darker and, as the name indicates, perennial. The flavour is exactly the same, though the thread through the middle is more pronounced. It is a fairly rare species, so only collect it once or twice, so that you can say you have done so. It usually grows in great numbers where it does find a home (south-eastern England), so you will not feel too guilty.

Marsh Samphire is a very short plant, mostly 7.5 to 10 cm tall, at which size it will be branching. Some monsters occur in favoured areas or during very hot summers, when it reaches 15 or 20 cm, aided in this by the fact that it is completely drought-proof because the sea is always wet. The cylindrical, conspicuously jointed and very succulent leaves arise from a wiry stem which will continue, annoyingly, right through the middle of mature, branching specimens. Bright green is the main colour, though red specimens are also common.

Perennial Wall-Rocket *Diplotaxis tenuifolia*

BRASSICACEAE

Perennial Wall-Rocket is a great wild food plant, so it is pity that it is found only in scattered locations. Fortunately, since it is non-native, if you do find some, you will not need to worry about picking it with some abandon. The plant is also perennial and shrubby, so it is possible to gather the leaves without too much destruction. The ‘scattered’ nature of the locations is typical of a cultivated ancestry – coastal and urban, with London, Bristol and Nottingham being among the more notable strongholds, though it is absent from most other towns. Its name is an indication of its likely habitat – walls – though this may include cracks in concrete driveways and suchlike. More often, however, it simply appears in wasteland. Identification is easy: the shrub is seldom more than one metre high, with fairly wiry branches, and the leaves are the typical lobed shape familiar

from the cultivated form. If you are still unsure, then try a nibble and all doubt will be cast aside.

Wild Rocket is one of the two species sold under that name in the greengrocer's. This is an extraordinary implied assertion for something that is so obviously cultivated. Wild-grown specimens are considerably more exciting because the leaves are more peppery, presumably because they grow more slowly. As with many species in the cabbage family, the familiar nutty flavour comes first, then the heat. The latter is 'designed' as a 'defence against herbivory', as most animals likely to eat the leaves are deterred by the intense flavour. The mysterious delay in the arrival of the peppery flavour is because the isocyanates that cause it are created (by the hydrolysis of glucosinolates by the enzyme myrosinase, if you really want to know) only when the leaf is chewed.

It will come as no surprise to learn that Perennial Wall-Rocket has a cousin known as Annual Wall-Rocket (*D. muralis*, a nicely appropriate name, as the Latin for ‘wall’ is *murus*). It is slightly more common, but often passed by because of its (very) superficial similarity to the Dandelion plant.

Sweet Woodruff *Galium odoratum*

RUBIACEAE

Sweet Woodruff is a common perennial plant of woodlands and often grown in gardens. I have some in a pot for emergencies, not that one has ever arisen – but it is best to be prepared. It is a relative of cleavers and bedstraws, with the same whorl of leaves. These whorls are 5 to 7.5 cm in diameter. Sweet Woodruff is common throughout most of lowland Britain, though fairly rare in the eastern half of England between London and Leeds.

The plant is used only as a flavouring, that flavour being coumarin, a chemical that smells of vanilla and hay meadows. It is very noticeable when the leaves are dried, and dried collections should be stored in a closed container. The famous English botanist A. R. Horwood refers to Woodruff exhaling ‘so delicious a perfume in the woods’. This perfume can find a use in the linen cupboard, to sweeten the bed sheets, which is more romantic, I think, than plastic bottles of fabric conditioner.

Sweet Woodruff is used in Germany to flavour a cordial known as *Waldmeistersirup*. This can be mixed with soda or lemonade for a long drink, poured over pancakes, ice cream or panna cotta, stirred into yoghurt or proper custard and so on.

My mind turns to Woodruff’s potential as an alcoholic infusion, and indeed it can be used fresh or dried to produce a drink similar to Sweet Vernal Grass vodka. Cocktails can be made with either drink, though with Woodruff these are often made with the syrup and the spirit added. Woodruff can also be included during the making of home-made white wines such as Elderflower and Gooseberry, or to flavour a jam.

Coumarin is moderately toxic, and Woodruff is very rich in this substance, with values of 0.5 to 1 per cent of fresh plant material. The ‘median’ lethal quantity for humans is a quarter of a gram for every kilogram they weigh. To reach this level someone weighing 11 stone would need to consume the coumarin from between 1.7 kg and 3.4 kg of leaves. This is not as much as one would hope, especially as this is the *lethal* level, so don’t hit the cocktails too hard, or the custard. Don’t worry too much,

though: coumarin is a common chemical in many familiar foods, including strawberries.

Wild Marjoram *Origanum vulgare* and allies

LAMIACEAE

Many of our wild native herbs are something of a disappointment. Not so Wild Marjoram. The fragrance is almost identical to, and as strong as, the cultivated species, pot marjoram, *O. marjorana*. If there is any confusion of names, it is because Wild Marjoram is also known as Oregano, the familiar Italian herb.

It is a common species, growing in dense tufts, chiefly along roadsides and always on an alkaline soil, usually chalk. Roadsides with chalky banks are, inevitably, the most productive. It is a rare plant in Scotland, confined mostly to the east; in England it has a few strongholds, such as the North and South Downs, but may be found anywhere with suitable soil. I once found a flourishing population in a decidedly acid area, growing on a pile of lime-rich builder's rubble.

Throughout spring the leaves are inconspicuous, hidden among the mass of other foliage in the hedgerow. But in summer the plant shouts its presence with a splendid display of pink/purple flowers. If the flowers are absent, then the aroma is an excellent clue. The plant grows to about 60 cm high, is quite shrubby in character and bears opposite pairs of leaves, alternately at right angles, on a square-section stem. It is usually when the flowers first appear that the plant is harvested by cutting the top 15 cm or so. These may be tied in sprigs and dried.

One of those disappointing wild herbs is worth a mention and at least one taste. Wild Thyme (*Thymus polytrichus*) is a common plant of delicate beauty which, surprisingly, barely smells of thyme at all, even when rubbed vigorously between the fingers. It is seldom more than a centimetre tall, but can form fairly large carpets on limestone, nutrient-poor grasslands and, quite frequently, covering anthills. The oval leaves grow from wiry stems, and the plant is extremely difficult to locate except when the purple/pink

flowers appear. It is often coastal but grows throughout much of Britain except central and south-eastern regions.

Wild Strawberry *Fragaria vesca*

ROSEACAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The cultivated strawberry is not a highly developed cultivar of the Wild Strawberry but a hybrid between two species from the Americas. The Wild Strawberry is a straightforward species with no dubious ancestry and is fairly well integrated into the British countryside since its introduction by the Romans. It is often known as the Alpine Strawberry. Wild Strawberry has a kingdom-wide if patchy distribution, with a slight preference for the south. Unfortunately, it is now classed as ‘near threatened’ in England.

Wild Strawberries are sometimes found in woodland and quite commonly at the base of hedgerows, but the most likely place to find one is in the garden, where some well-meaning predecessor had sown a few seeds. It can then make a nuisance of itself, running everywhere, but it is pleasant to be able to nibble a few while you are pottering, and gardeners are loath to uproot them. Newspaper reports from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries frequently mention some new strawberry found by an enthusiast in the wild, and a few of these (larger-berried, usually) lineages made it into gardens. Shakespeare writes casually of garden strawberries in *Richard III*, when the eponymous king speaks:

> *My lord of Ely, when I was last in Holborn,*
> *I saw good strawberries in your garden there;*
> *I do beseech you, send for some of them!*

Richard might have needed to wait a while, as picking enough strawberries to feed a noble appetite takes dedication and time. Wild Strawberries are tiny, barely 0.5 cm in diameter. In wild populations they are less than abundant – the odd berry here and there – though sometimes you will be lucky and find a large patch of them. I did, once, find enough to make half a jar of jam, and very good it was too. Fortunately, they enjoy a long season, and it is not unknown for them still to be fruiting in December.

No one needs any help identifying strawberries, and the three, veined, sharply toothed leaflets on each petiole make it identifiable even without flowers or fruit. But you may be disappointed if you follow the fortunes of a ‘strawberry’ plant that never fruits. The barren strawberry *Potentilla sterilis* grows in the same habitat and is virtually identical to the Wild Strawberry save in the crucial matter of it producing no strawberries at all. This impostor can be identified by looking to the very tip of the leaflets. The terminal tooth is shorter than those on either side, while in the Wild Strawberry it is longer.

Wormwoods *Artemisia absinthium, A. maritimum*

ASTERACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Of all the forageables described in the book, Wormwood is second only to Truffles in mystery. Its long cultural history, evocative name, medicinal

uses, dark reputation for engendering psychological excess from its use in vermouth and absinthe, and its deadliness in sufficient doses have conspired to make it a plant held in awe. Yet few people would recognise it in the wild. It is not native to Britain and, like most introduced species, makes a home for itself in odd corners and disturbed ground wherever there is good light and fairly dry soil. It is also a cultivated plant, and the densest population I have ever discovered was adorning a flowerbed in a Salisbury park. Apart from Salisbury, its main stronghold is the Midlands. Elsewhere, it is scattered or coastal, and it is rare north of Leeds.

Wormwood is an easily identified small shrub, with soft, grey/green, branching leaves on stiff, woody stems and branches. The flowers are ochre with barely visible petals. However, what truly helps is the smell. It is impossible to describe accurately, but if you imagine camphor, turpentine and the nastiest joss stick you ever smelled, mixed together and heated gently, you won't be far off. On several occasions I have had to consign a small collection to the back of my pick-up as its presence in the cab became intolerable.

Sea Wormwood is probably a native. It certainly seems happier here, with a nicely defined habitat: salt marshes. Its main populations are Hampshire and Sussex, from the Thames estuary north to the Humber estuary, south Wales and the eastern coast of Scotland. It is a beautiful, delicate plant compared with its cousins, and its smell is milder and more pleasant. Unfortunately, its restricted habitat and distribution make it a plant that should not be collected without due consideration – though, fortunately, you will not need very much of it. It is very similar to Wormwood, but without a tough stem, and smaller, at about 30 cm tall.

It is tempting to think that Wormwood derived its name from its use as a vermifuge, but it may not be so. The plant's etymology seems to be lost to us, with various suggestions made over the years. My favourite is that it comes from *wer* and *mod*, which are respectively Saxon for 'man' and 'courage', a reference to its onetime use as an aphrodisiac. Wormwood's talents as a herbal remedy go beyond the encouragement of enthusiasm. Anything with so powerful an olfactory character must, it was thought, be good for lots of ailments. My friend Elizabeth's great-grandfather used to take a glass of wormwood tea every other evening as a preventative. Preventative of what I do not know, though it was probably an aid to digestion. Whatever it was, it worked, as he lived well into his nineties.

The workhouse was a notorious place in its time, both for the shame of the inmates (poverty was considered more sin than misfortune) and for the unpleasantness of their living conditions. Wormwood was used here, and elsewhere, to de-louse the linen, sprigs of the stuff being put between the sheets. It was also placed strategically around the living quarters to mask the unpleasant smells, so that ‘every Gentlemen and every *Lady* whose Curiosity hath led them to visit that House’, would not be offended.

Wormwood is not simply strong of aroma; it is also powerfully bitter. These two characters combined qualified it as an ingredient in ale, along with other plants such as Sweet Gale (p. 158) and Yarrow (p. 169). In the sixteenth century hops were considered dangerous and banned from use in beers. But by the eighteenth century it was Wormwood that was banned, as is testified by the occasional fines levied on brewers who used it as a cheap substitute for the now entirely legal, and expensive, hops. For any home-brewer wishing to try Wormwood in their beer, I suggest adding a single

sprig to a lightly hopped wort at copper-off (with my customary apologies to non-brewers, who may not understand a word of this).

Wormwood in beer is mostly a thing of the past. But for two drinks it is a present necessity: vermouth and absinthe. ‘Vermouth’ is a cognate of ‘wormwood’ and an essential ingredient. Vermouth is made by steeping Wormwood and other herbs in spirit for a few days, which is then distilled and added to a dry white wine. Absinthe is a distilled spirit infusion of Wormwood, anise and other herbs and spices, coloured a shocking green with fresh, neutral-flavoured plant leaves, traditionally, Brooklime. Both these processes are, more or less, reproducible at home, and vermouth is discussed with another *Artemisia* species, Mugwort, on p. 205.

The intense bitterness of Wormwood naturally invites its use in the making of bitters. These powerful additions to cocktails, added a drop at a time, are easy to make at home. Infuse Wormwood in vodka with any of orange peel, cassia, coffee bean or a hundred other possibilities for two weeks and decant off.

A note of warning. Wormwood is toxic. Not very, but people have nearly died from renal failure by consuming oil of Wormwood by mistake, and its percentage in absinthe is limited by law in Europe. In fact, it is not Wormwood that is limited but α-thujone, the component that can produce seizures and other unpleasantness. One of its effects is reputedly psychoactive, causing changes in attention, mood and visual perception (psychedelic), and it is for this, rightly or wrongly, that absinthe became so notorious.

The quantity of α-thujone varies enormously from plant to plant: anything from none at all to 2 mg per gram of *dried* material. The drying process itself reduces the levels of α-thujone. The EU limit is 35 mg per litre of absinthe, so, taking the worst case of 2 mg per gram, you could put 17 gm of dried Wormwood in one litre of alcohol or tea. Of course, it is not just about concentrations, it is also quantity, so take it easy.

JULY

July is often considered to be the start of the ‘lean period’, which continues to mid August. The greens of spring have largely gone, and the reds, purples and browns of autumn have yet to arrive. There is some truth in this, and you may need to redirect your efforts to the more disturbed habitats, such as your own garden, or to the seashore. July does, however, have some first-class specialists. The glorious if unreliable Cherry Plum can turn the roadside hedge yellow and red, Meadowsweet is conspicuous in hedgerows and wet fields, and Raspberries can be found in woodland glades and hedgerows. My favourite July specialist is the Black Garden Ant. Its virgin queens fly in huge numbers from their nest for a period of two hours on just one day, right in the middle of July.

Annual Sea-Blite
Black Garden Ant and allies
Cherry
Cherry Plum
Horse Mushroom and allies
Meadowsweet
Mugwort
Opium Poppy and allies
Raspberry
Redcurrant
Wild Radishes

Also found

Bittercresses
Black Mustard(seeds)
Blackberry
Blackthorn (leaves)
Carragheen and allies
Charcoal Burner
Chicken of the Woods
Chickweed
Common Mallow
Dabberlocks (and Wakame)
Dulse Elder (flowers, at the beginning of the month)
Fat Hen
Fennel (leaves and flower heads)
Garden Snail
Giant Puffball
Gooseberry
Gutweed
Himalayan Balsam
Horseradish Japanese Rose (flowers)
Juniper
Laver
Marsh Samphire
Oak Moss
Oar Weed and allies
Oyster Mushrooms and allies
Parasol Mushrooms
Penny Bun and allies
Pepper Dulse and allies
Perennial Wall Rocket
Rock Samphire
Sea Beet
Sea Purslane

Sea Rocket
Sea Spaghetti
Serrated Wrack and allies
Silverweed
Spear-Leaved Orache
Stinging Nettle (regrowth and seeds)
Sugar Kelp
Summer Truffle
Sweet Cicely
Sweet Gale
Sweet Woodruff
Tawny Grisette and allies
Watercress
Watermint and allies
Wild Angelica
Wild Marjoram
Wild Strawberry
Wood Sorrel
Wormwoods
Yarrow

Annual Sea-Blite *Suaeda maritima*

CHENOPODIACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Annual Sea-Blite is a much-overlooked seashore succulent in the Goosefoot family and far less appreciated than the best-known of them, Marsh Samphire. It does lack the latter's intense saltiness, but is almost as succulent. It grows in the same general habitats, mudflats, but Annual Sea-Blite is not so keen on receiving a soaking twice a day and grows mostly out of the water. It is a small plant, at only 30 cm tall, and frequently grows rather prostrate. Its green-turning-red leaves curve upwards from the branching stems and look like succulent fingers. The stem is usually red.

Annual Sea-Blite is found in many parts of the world and is collected in Thailand, where it is used in salad, in Sea-Blite curry with crabs, and served scalded with a chilli paste. Salad is the most obvious use for so pretty a plant, with sprigs placed artistically on fish.

Black Garden Ant *Lasius niger* and allies

FORMICIDAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Most wild foods provide a collecting window of between a couple of weeks and the entire year. This ubiquitous ant is singular in the forager's calendar

in that you have but a single day, but you never know precisely when it will be.

On a warm, still, balmy day in July or August, thousands of virgin queens will take to the air for their nuptial flight, launching themselves in an impressive and distinctive vertical take-off and hoping to avoid predators in the form of birds or man. Collecting alates (winged queens or, less substantial, drones) for food is common practice in many rural cultures. Many ant species and also termites produce alates, and their appearance will cause much excitement as a feast is in store. The Black Garden Ant is the most accessible to the European forager as it is very common and, clearly, an ant that likes gardens.

‘Flying ant day’ may be a single day, if suitable weather descends over the entire country, but more often it will be a meteorologically determined local phenomenon. The queens illustrated here were caught on 17 July 2017 in West Dorset. It was typically hot and still. The queens had clambered to the top of my garden wall, attended by hundreds of workers. A queen would fly every ten seconds or so, and I swept my butterfly net each time, missing half of them. The workers became very agitated by the unexpected ‘wind’, assuming that the weather forecast had been inaccurate. But still the queens flew, and I caught a few dozen.

They are much larger than the workers, with a fat abdomen which, incidentally, turns stripy on cooking. Getting them from the net into a frying

pan proved troublesome, with several making a successful bid for freedom. Cooking took fifteen seconds. My ill-fated virgin queens were crunchy and tasty; I liked them, though a little salt would have helped. I took some to the ultimate arbiters of edibility – the ladies who work in the corner shop. They refused to try even one and enquired if I had ever considered getting a proper job. A pity, I thought, and rude.

There are also the much larger Wood Ants. I took a wild food foray with the Danish forager Thomas Laursen some years ago. We found one of those giant, scary anthills made of Pine needles. Thomas called everyone round and placed his palm flat against the hill. Immediately, distraught and affronted ants swarmed over his hand. One of the women present asked if they were stinging him. He said, laconically, ‘Yes, a little.’ He removed his hand, licked a few of them off and offered the rest around. Thomas’s shameless alpha-male display seemed to impress some participants (mostly the women), while us betas were left feeling a little shamefaced and outperformed.

The trick with eating live ants is to bite them before they bite you. The flavour is a great surprise to anyone who has never eaten an ant before – fruity and complex. The fruit is usually lemon, but sometimes tangerine. No one ever got fat from eating ants; even for their size, they have very little food value. But if you want to be an alpha male, or alpha female, then do give them a try.

Thomas collects wild ants for some top-end restaurants and often a variety of species with a variety of flavours. One species of Wood Ant he collects by laboriously sucking them into a pooter (a jar with two rubber tubes attached, one of which is positioned over a victim and one of which is sucked, the ants – well, most of them – ending up in the jar), waylaying them as they make their journeys up and down oak trees. All ants are edible, but don't go near them if you are seriously susceptible to insect bites.

Cherry *Prunus avium*

ROSACEAE

The forager should always take a pragmatic approach to precise identification. With cherries, provided it is a Cherry, it will not matter if it is truly wild, planted along a bypass or growing in a park. The Wild Cherry is a long-established native species with small and sometimes sweet fruit. The cultivated Cherry is the same species; it has just been selected for larger fruit – unless it is a flowering cherry, which will probably have smaller fruit. Cherries are familiar to everyone, but it is worth noting the way in which they are attached to the tree. They form at the end of long pedicels (stems), which grow from the same point on the branch. If they branch off separately and are small and dark, they are likely to be the Bird Cherry, *Prunus padus*. This fruit is just about edible, but contains more than its fair share of hydrogen cyanide.

One certainly does see Wild Cherries in woodlands and occasionally in hedgerows, but not often. Those within the woods do not fruit well or at all, as Cherry trees need full sunlight and will not fruit unless on a wood edge. It is found throughout lowland Britain. Even if you are lucky enough to find a tree with fruit, there is the further problem in the form of mistle thrushes. I

recently spotted a roadside Cherry tree that was covered in immature fruit and vowed to revisit it in about a week. When I returned, there was not a single fruit on the tree, and the ground below it was covered with Cherry stones.

Cherry Plum *Prunus cerasifera*
ROSACEAE

If you have ever wondered what the squashed mess of fruit is that appears on pavements and roadsides in late July and August, it is very likely to be Cherry Plums. Cherry Plum trees are almost invariably planted along roadsides by authorities tasked with such matters, and are seldom found in anything that might be called ‘the wild’. They show a strong preference for England, with only scattered and coastal populations in Scotland and Wales. The fruit is similar to the Mirabelle Plum from which it can only be readily distinguished earlier in the year, the Cherry Plum having green twigs when young, not brown. The Mirabelle is a subspecies of Plum, *Prunus domesticus subsp. syriaca*.

Among the mess on the pavement, and certainly in the tree above, there will be many perfect Cherry Plums. Most people will leave them to rot, their mother’s warning about eating berries of unknown provenance being etched into their heart. They look very much like cherries but are clearly not, yet neither do they look quite like plums. Their Latin name nicely reflects this puzzle, meaning ‘plum that bears cherries’.

But they are perfectly edible, though the flavour is a little unreliable, as with many plums. They come in yellow and red varieties, but I cannot say which is best as they vary so much from year to year and tree to tree. What they all do is grow in enormous numbers, with perhaps a hundred on a single branch. They can be difficult to reach, and putting up a stepladder on

the roadside is dangerous and likely to cause comment, so go equipped with a fruit-picker.

Cherry Plum is very early to flower, February being usual. This can cause problems later, and if the flowers suffer bad weather, fruiting may not occur at all and several years can go by with no Cherry Plums appearing. All the more reason to pick as many as you can, when you can. They can be used just like any Plum, but most of those not eaten fresh go to make Cherry Plum brandy, jam and crumble. Since it is a glut fruit, you may need more imagination than I have displayed.

Horse Mushroom *Agaricus arvensis* and **Macro Mushroom** *Agaricus urinascens*

AGARICACEAE • SPORES DARK BROWN

There are several large *Agaricus* species that are generally considered to be 'Horse' mushrooms, but only *A. arvensis* should bear that name. All, fortunately, are edible, so if you pick *A. macrocarpus* instead, no harm will be done, except that it is fairly rare. If you find any large white mushroom in a field with a large, pendulous ring on the stem and pink turning to brown gills, you are very likely to have something that will make an excellent supper dish. As with all *Agaricus* species, there is the Yellow Stainer to worry you (p. 349), so beware of anything that bruises bright yellow immediately.

The Horse and Macro Mushrooms are grassland species, forming large rings, and they are wonderful things to find. The quickest way to distinguish between them is to look at the stem. The former has a stem that is smooth except at the base, the latter a stem that is woolly all the way up to the ring. The Horse Mushroom also has pure white flesh, which *slowly* bruises yellow, while the flesh of the Macro Mushroom remains pure white and tends to be thicker. Finally (and probably the reason you would need to know the difference in the first place), Horse Mushrooms have a strong, sweet smell of aniseed, while Macro Mushrooms have a fainter smell which, after a day or two, turns to that of urine – hence the Latin name. Eat them quickly.

Horse and Macro Mushrooms require old pasture and are becoming less frequent now that so much of it is ploughed. The field may recover after a gentle ploughing or harrowing, but it may take a few years.

The flavour is strong and the mushrooms magnificent to behold, so I never chop them up but slowly fry them, with only the stem removed, on both sides in a frying pan, often a large one. The discarded stem can be dried, powdered and stored.

Macro Mushroom

Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*

ROSACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The rose is often considered to be the perfume of high summer, but our wild roses are demure in both appearance and fragrance. Not so the flamboyant Meadowsweet. Its frothy cream blossoms stretch for miles along footpath and hedgerow, and every damp meadow will fill with them. Their perfume

is quite unlike the familiar sweetness of the rose but is instead earthy, heady and full of passion. Such evocative smells inevitably invite poetry, and Meadowsweet has suffered thus greatly. I found six poems of dubious worth in no time at all. ‘Ah, love! Do *you* know meadowsweet? Does some pale ghost of passion fleet.’ We need no more.

If you have ever stood on a summer’s day with the smell of Meadowsweet in your nose, you will understand what I mean by ‘heady’. There is a strong hint of Elderflower about it, but lacking its fruitiness. The smell that it provides is more base. I apologise beforehand for this, but the standard word used for this smell is ‘spermatic’. There is, however, another, quite unexpected smell to hand if you crush any part of the plant. It is the unmistakable smell of antiseptic cream.

Concerns of both health and love are encompassed by Meadowsweet. It has an old and a current history of use in herbal medicine, and two more of its names were Bridewort and Courtship and Marriage. A short story published in 1917 tells of a girl sewing a sprig of Meadowsweet into the pocket of her betrothed to ensure his return from war (it worked), and it was once used as a bridal adornment.

Despite the smell of the crushed plant, it is not as an antiseptic that Meadowsweet is primarily known but as a painkiller and antipyretic. Meadowsweet once belonged to the genus *Spirea*, and it is from this name that the word ‘aspirin’ was derived as the plant contains moderately large quantities of salicylic acid, a relative of the active ingredient. This is an effective analgesic but causes bleeding in the stomach of some people, and so the more benign acetylsalicylic acid is used now. Herbalists swear by the plant, and they may well be right, as there are many beneficial chemicals contained within it and they often work together, but it takes about 300 g of dried plant to provide the equivalent of two aspirin tablets. Furthermore, Meadowsweet also contains coumarin, a chemical that is known to cause bleeding. However, my herbally inclined friend Monica gave me some skin wax that contains Meadowsweet. I rub it on anything I don’t much like the look of and it goes away.

Meadowsweet is conspicuous by its size and its sprays of untidy, frothy cream flowers. The deep-green leaves are rather ‘sharp’ in appearance with a sawtooth margin, in opposite pairs, which have a pointed-oval shape and a terminal leaf with three pointed lobes. They are strongly ribbed, with the leaf between ribs curving upwards, like corrugated iron.

The complex aromas of Meadowsweet – grassy, phenolic, sweet almond, vanilla and honey – make it a curious herb to use and like no other. Its name derives not from ‘meadow’ but from ‘mead’, for which it was once a flavouring ingredient. That path is still open to you, but the modern cook and brewer is endlessly imaginative and the plant can flavour a cordial, a spirit infusion, a panna cotta, a sorbet, a Turkish delight and so on. And yes, you can even make a herbal tea with it.

All parts of the plant are aromatic, though it is the ‘cymbe’ of flowers that are mostly used. Meadowsweet blossom has a long season, from June to September, though it sometimes lingers into late October if cut back at some point. The sweet, early blossoms are to be preferred to the later, bitter ones – a fact that my foraging friend Mark Williams, cynic that he is, suggests is the true origin of Courtship and Marriage as a name. You

certainly will not have any trouble finding it, as there is barely a damp corner of Britain where it does not grow.

Mugwort *Artemisia vulgaris*

ASTERACEAE

Every winter I set off to attend the annual meeting of the Association of Foragers. There are three days of meetings, going to the pub, forays and going to the pub again. Knowledge and strongly held opinions are swapped. Once, we had an informal vote on which was our favourite plant to forage. I was a little surprised to discover that the winner by a length was Mugwort. While it does have a strong aromatic flavour and is easy to collect, it is not as readily useful as my own odds-on favourite, Sea Beet. But I understand. For some reason, Mugwort is a plant I am always delighted to see, even though I collect it only two or three times a year.

Mugwort is extremely common but unnoticed by most. It grows throughout lowland Britain, with a slight preference for the south and for coasts. Roadsides, indeed the very edge of roadsides, seem to be its favoured habitat, and it has long been so. ‘For a man that sal begyn to travayle: tak mugworte, and carry hit with thee, and thee sal noght fele na werynesse’ is the advice of a fourteenth-century Saxon sage, assuring us that it is a plant readily found by any traveller. As something of a bonus, it can save you a certain amount of domestic trouble too – ‘and whare thee dos it in houses na elves na evyll thynges may come therein’.

Mugwort’s heyday as a medicinal herb was during the nineteenth century, when a few highly suspect experiments carried out in workhouses (where the experimental mice of the day, the poor, were readily available) and subsequent commendations from notable medics provided the plant with a reputation for greatly reducing the frequency of epileptic seizures. In 1863 a bottle of an infusion of Mugwort could be had for 2s. (£10 in modern terms). It does seem to possess a few valuable medicinal properties, though alleviating epileptic symptoms is unlikely to be one of them. Therapeutic value aside, according to my fellow forager Monica Wilde, Mugwort tea is worth drinking before you go to bed as it induces vivid and lucid dreams.

It is a fairly tall plant, at 1.25 to 1.5 m high, reaching this height from almost nothing every year, quite late and very quickly, nourished by its deep, perennial roots. The leaves are long, with deeply incised lobes, dark green on the upper side and almost white beneath. In summer the highly fragrant but understated flowers form. The flowers, and especially the flower buds, are the most powerfully aromatic parts.

The smell of Mugwort is somewhat similar to rosemary and so works very well with lamb dishes or anywhere that herb is helpfully employed. The taste has a bitter component, though nowhere near as shockingly so as that of Wormwood. It is to the seventeenth-century German explorer and naturalist Engelbert Kaempfer that we owe the first Western record of the Japanese dish *futsumotzi*, also known as *kusa mochi*, a species of dumpling. Mugwort leaves (actually, those of the similar Japanese Mugwort, *Artemisia*

princeps) are soaked in water for a day to reduce the bitterness, then dried and powdered. The powder is mixed with boiled rice and coarsely ground aduki beans and made into cakes, which are baked.

Mugwort is one of the aroma and bittering herbs used for ale before hops were invented. But for the home-brewer a little experimenting can be interesting, and a small handful of Mugwort added during the last five minutes of the boiling process will make your pale ale a little more distinctive.

I was due to present one of my wild-cocktail events at a rather posh venue in London. I feared that the sophisticated London palate might not appreciate my usual sweet and fruity take on cocktails and prefer something more traditionally dry. A martini, perhaps. I collected every herb I could find that might work to make the vermouth base. After a mere half an hour my basket contained Alexander seeds, scentless Mayweed, Wormwood and, yes, Mugwort. These I infused in some reasonably decent vodka for a few days, then decanted it off. There is a better, if slightly illegal way, than just decanting it – see p. 290. I searched through my collection of home-made wines, looking for something white and dry, and settled on a bottle of dry dandelion wine as being considerably less revolting than the nearby parsnip or (especially) the Jerusalem artichoke. I drank a glass of the wine to check it was OK and to make room for the vodka infusion. My work was evidently worthwhile, as, slightly to my surprise, everyone loved my wild gin martini.

Opium Poppy *Papaver somniferum* and allies

PAPAVERACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

No other organism in this book has as long and chequered a history as the Opium Poppy. It has been both the cause and the relief of so much pain. Such matters are not for this book, as we are concerned merely with the edible and generally benign seeds. However, just to satisfy your curiosity, some varieties of Opium Poppy found wild or in gardens in Britain still produce latex containing potent alkaloids such as morphine and thebaine. My friend Terry told me that gently drawing the point of a pin down the side of the immature (still green) capsule may allow the latex to exude over

a few hours. It will dry and can be gently scraped away. Do not try this at home.

Opium Poppies grow in most parts of Britain, though they are uncommon in western areas and, save for a few scattered locations, only present in Scotland along the east coast. It is obviously not a native plant and grows in odd locations, seemingly at random. The specimen pictured here was growing, on its own, in the middle of a field of cows. Hedgerows, gardens and wasteland are more common habitats. It is an unmistakable plant even without the flowers, which are typically lilac with a purple centre, though I realise that the one in the photograph is red. The leaves are a pale green, thick and unusually broad for a poppy, like those of a bolted lettuce.

The Common Poppy, *Papaver rhoeas*, may also be used for its seeds, though the capsules are much smaller. Avoid the Yellow Horned Poppy, as

it is seriously poisonous, though uncommon. It is found among pebbles and gravel on upper shores.

Cut the flower stems near the base of the plant when they are mature but have not yet lost their seeds. Slightly younger capsules will mature after cutting if that is all you find. Poppy seeds come with their own handy sprinkler: just slice off the top and the seeds will fall out when inverted.

Poppy seeds are best known as a topping for bread, the toasted flavour they acquire during cooking being particularly good. They can also be ground (or blended) into a paste. A substantial use for this is with sugar, butter, lemon and milk mixed with the poppy seed paste to form a filling for a sweet, bread-based ‘Swiss roll’. Other uses for poppy seeds are in curries, but, being so mild, they can be used almost anywhere.

Raspberry *Rubus idaeus*

ROSACEAE

While I consider Raspberries to be the finest of fruits, it was this plant that put me off gardening for ever. In my allotment days I built an enormous fruit cage and planted it with Raspberry canes, which I studiously kept weeded and pruned. I enjoyed three years of moderate crops before a virus struck and the whole area had to be dug up and given over to carrots. The carrots were in turn dug up by badgers (it looked like a battlefield), and I decided that my gardening days were over.

But there are wild Raspberries, which, like all wild foods, require no effort at all apart from that required to pick them. Unfortunately, although of good flavour, if seldom thoroughly sweet, they are small, often difficult to find and sparse when you do find them. Unless you are extraordinarily lucky, it is another snack to cheer a walk and not to be collected for jam- or cocktail-making. Should you hit the big time and find more wild Raspberries than you can eat on the spot, then use the juice to make my Pink Pint, which is described with the roses on p. 180.

Any expedition to find raspberries will be in woodland, or hedgerow, for the raspberry is a fruit of forest clearings. Sometimes they can dominate such a clearing, and an hour or two of pleasant foraging is before you. They

are not particularly concerned about which type of woodland, and I once found a good crop in Scotland alongside the more open paths of a Pine and Spruce plantation. The Raspberry is a tough plant, able to endure low temperatures, and it is possible to find some wherever there is a well-drained and mildly acidic humus base for them to grow on and a wood or hedgerow to grow in.

There is no reason for me to describe the fruit, beyond telling you that they grow on 125–150 cm canes and have broad, oval-pointed leaves which come with a sawtooth edge and grow in threes, or, indeed, for me to provide any recipes.

Redcurrant *Ribes rubrum*

ROSACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Things never really moved on for the humble Redcurrant. Its sour and less than exciting flavour had doomed it to a life as a jelly to go with meats, though it performs this function well. Modern chefs have invented new things to do with it, but it is mostly as an adjunct in such things as Raspberry and Redcurrant pudding or to bring some colour to an apple pie. Redcurrant wine is a further possibility, and one with a venerable past. In the late eighteenth century one could buy a gallon (4.5 l) for 6s. (about £35 now), though anyone buying twenty gallons or more could have it for 5/9d. Making Redcurrant wine was and is an endeavour not to be taken lightly, involving buckets of berries, which, even from cultivated plants, take a very long time to pick.

I am being a little harsh about Redcurrants, but I must be harsher still about the reliability of the wild plant. It is common in woodlands and hedgerows throughout the country, and in spring it will abound with flowers. By the time the berries ripen, however, most have either failed to set or been picked-off by birds. Occasionally you find a well-provided plant, but still the berries will be disappointingly sparse. The main crop arrives in July, but it is not unknown for a much later crop to appear in late September.

The small saving grace is that both flower and leaf can be used to make a herbal tea. Small indeed.

Wild Radish *Raphanus raphanistrum* and **Sea Radish** *Raphanus raphanistrum maritinum*

BRASSICACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun **Jul** Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Wild Radishes are startling plants for anyone used to the small, round, pink roots and fine soft foliage of the cultivated variety, *R. sativus*. The wild plants are tall, rough and, while they possess a root, it is one that is long, white and as tough as a tree branch. What, then, is there to eat? The leaves are bristly, but when young they are just about edible, with a mild radish flavour. However, they are still something of a challenge in a salad, so it is to the flowers and immature seed pods that I turn. The flowers are merely decorative, with a hint of sweetness from the nectaries and a slight radish

flavour. The immature seed pods, by contrast, are a treat: crunchy, succulent and with the peppery flavour with which we are familiar. In fact, they are better than the roots we grow in our gardens. In addition to being a salad ingredient, they can be used in a salt pickle or as an admittedly rather odd pesto. They are very distinct as they are similar to a row of beads and with a pointed end. They must be immature as the seeds within the pod turn to tooth-threatening ball bearings as they age.

Wild Radish is common in Britain, but coastal in Wales, northern England and Scotland. Sea Radish is by far the larger plant, and restricted to southern and western coasts. It is less common and should be collected with care – though losing a few seed pods can do it no harm.

AUGUST

Considering that August is often thought a poor time for foraging, compared with spring and autumn, there are a surprisingly large number of species that make it into this month's chapter for the first time, and many, many that are continuing from July or earlier, or which frequently arrive ahead of their main season.

Several mushroom species are introduced here, but it is only in a damp summer that they are likely to arrive in August. The Summer Truffle, and to some extent Chicken of the Woods, are exceptions, as they rely less on recent rainfall. The big prize of August is Sea Buckthorn, which is at its juiciest towards the end of the month.

Bilberry
Blackberry
Charcoal Burner
Chicken of the Woods
Crowberry
Dewberry and allies
Fairy Ring Champignon
Giant Puffball
Himalayan Balsam
Lingonberry
Oyster Mushrooms and allies
Parasol Mushrooms
Penny Bun and allies
The Prince
Rowan
Scarletina Bolete
Sea Buckthorn
Summer Truffle
Tawny Grisette and allies
Wild Angelica

Also found

Alexanders (seeds)
Annual Sea-Blite
Beefsteak Fungus
Bittercresses
Blusher
Brown Birch Bolete
Carragheen and allies
Cauliflower Fungus
Chanterelle
Cherry Plum
Chickweed
Common Mallow
Dabberlocks (and Wakame)
Dulse
Elder (berries)
Fat Hen
Fennel (seeds)
Field Mushroom
Gutweed
Hedgehog Mushrooms
Hen of the Woods
Hogweed (seeds)
Hop (flowers)
Horse Mushroom and allies
Horseradish
Japanese Rose (flowers and hips)
Juniper
Laver
Marsh Samphire
Meadow Puffball and allies
Meadowsweet
Mugwort

Oak Moss
Oar Weed and allies
Ochre Brittlegill
Opium Poppy and allies
Orange Birch Bolete and allies
Perennial Wall Rocket
Raspberry
Redcurrant
Rock Samphire
Sea Beet
Sea Purslane
Sea Rocket
Sea Spaghetti
Serrated Wrack and allies
Silverweed
Spear-Leaved Orache
Stinging Nettle (regrowth and seeds)
Sugar Kelp
Sweet Cicely
Sweet Gale
Sweet Woodruff
The Miller
Trumpet Chanterelle
Watercress
Watermint and allies
Wild Marjoram
Wild Plum and allies
Wild Strawberry
Wood Ear
Wood Sorrel
Wormwoods
Yarrow

Bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus*

ERICACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul **Aug** Sep Oct Nov Dec

The round, purple Bilberry (or Blaeberry, or any of twenty other names recorded by Geoffrey Grigson in his *Englishman's Flora*) is visibly a relative of heather and shares with its cousin the acid soils of both upland and lowland. It is found in suitable habitats throughout Britain. It is a very good berry to eat and is known for its health-bestowing properties. What it is not generally known for is causing riots.

Early on the morning of Saturday, 31 July 1848, Benjamin Oates, a file-maker who had fallen on difficult times, set off from his home in Sheffield with family and friends and walked the 20 km to the moors above Bradfield Dale. Their aim was to pick Bilberries to sell in the town, an activity that was necessary to their financial well-being even in good times. What was to ensue was a battle in what might be called the 'Bradfield Bilberry War'. It was also described at the time as the 'Tyranny on the Moors', and is but one of a thousand sad stories that accompanied the inclosure of the commons.

This bit of moorland, just to the west of Sheffield, had been inclosed (the word means ‘taken out of common ownership’, not simply being fenced) prior to the Parliamentary inclosures, but the ‘common’ people had long continued to collect Bilberries from what was once known as the ‘waste’ – land not cultivated but with rights of common for rough grazing and foraging. It was this that was lost (or stolen) through inclosure. In this case, the land was used by the tenant for grouse shoots in association with the Bradfield Game Association. Both the tenant and the Association took a dim view of people trekking all over the grouse moor so soon before the glorious 12th, and, as was the tradition, they sent ‘ruffians’, fired up with a suitable beverage, to see them off. Blood was shed, Bilberries confiscated, Oates had his meagre lunch taken off him and several of the Bilberry

pickers ended up before the magistrate; most were fined, and at least one ended up in gaol.

I would not recommend the picking of Bilberries on a grouse moor in July or August even now, as there are many less lethal and troublesome places to find them. The Peaks west of Sheffield were well known for their Bilberries (there are still two pubs in the area called The Blue Ball), but even here, finding more than a basketful in a day would not have been easy. The wiry bushes, strategically placed at back-breaking height, will produce no more than a dozen or so berries at any one time, and a crawl to another bush is required. I have never succeeded in filling a basket; indeed I have never taken any home. They are food to eat as we were meant to eat everything – on the hoof. If you are luckier, or more dedicated than I, then to honour the Bradfield Martyrs I suggest the local dish Bilberry Pudding.

Blackberry *Rubus fruticosus*

ROSACEAE

The humble Blackberry is so familiar, so well loved, that there is little for me to say that can help you find it (it grows nearly everywhere), avoid dangerous lookalikes (there are none) or prepare it (everyone knows). But there are a few tales to tell.

As one would expect from the ubiquitous Blackberry, it has many local names. These are often inventive and particularly so in this case. In Donegal it was the ‘cock-bramble’, and Worcestershire has it as ‘county lawyers’ (probably in reference to the vicious thorns rather than the sweet fruit). I like the evocative Scottish term ‘lady garten berries’ and the incomprehensible Cumbrian ‘bumble kites’. There are twenty more to choose from. Of course, Blackberry is the name of the fruit, the plant itself being the Bramble, from the Middle English *brǽmbel*.

The Latin name, *Rubus fruticosus*, was supplied by the great botanist and taxonomist Linnaeus, and everyone was content with that, while noting that brambles are rather variable in form. Botanists are seldom content and have divided what most people would consider to obviously be a bramble into around 350 micro-species, none of which is called *Rubus fruticosus*. *Rubus fruticosus* agg. (for ‘aggregate’) is the name botanists use informally: at dinner parties, for example. Of course, they don’t even agree with each other on the taxonomic position of brambles, but will usually say (incomprehensibly) that ‘they are any and all members of the subgenus

Rubus within the genus *Rubus*, sub-section *Glandulosus*'. Should you ever suffer insomnia, I suggest reading up on this fascinating subject. Bramble specialists, incidentally, are known as 'batologists', just the sort of question to enliven a pub quiz night.

The upshot of all this for the forager is that Bramble plants vary. Not just with growing conditions and weather, but inherently. Some micro-species may fruit earlier or later than average; some may produce small, hard fruit while others are more giving, with large, sweet fruit. My favourite spot provides enormous, sweet Blackberries from late July. Yes, it is a *secret* spot, so find your own.

Collecting Blackberries is a notoriously dangerous occupation owing to the truly nasty, backward-pointing thorns. I go seriously equipped with big boots, big hat, thick trousers and top, one leather glove (to hold the stalk while my ungloved hand picks the fruit) and a walking stick to extend my reach. Once the easy-to-reach berries are in the basket, there will still be many more beckoning, and, with giant steps I tread down the Brambles in order to move closer.

Blackberries can be found any time from late July to late October, with late August to early September being high season. Do not worry at all about picking them after Michaelmas, when the Devil is supposed to spit on them. As long as they look OK and are not infected by the grey mould of *Botrytis cinerea*, they will be fine.

There is no need for me to tell you what to do with Blackberries: Blackberry and apple crumble, Blackberry fool, Blackberry wine and so on. But two things are worth mentioning: Blackberry whisky and Blackberry vinegar. For the former, fill a Kilner jar with berries, add some sugar to taste, top the jar with a reasonable (but not *too* good) whisky and leave for (sorry about this) at least a year. Remove the berries when the year is up (don't throw them away, they are useful and fun at children's parties), bottle the liquor and leave for another year, at least. The painfully long wait is required for the flavours to blend.

Blackberry vinegar is great stuff, and worth making if you have some berries that are showing signs of age. Mash them up and stir in one-third their weight of sugar. Place in a jar or jug, outside in a sunny location and uncovered. This allows fruit flies (vinegar flies) to land in the jar (along with the odd wasp) and infect the mixture with acetobacter. After two days, remove the wasp corpses, cover with a cloth and leave for a month. Check

that you can smell vinegar after a week or so. Strain off the solids and bring the liquor to a boil in a saucepan, then pour into a jug. Leave, covered, for a day or two to allow all the solid matter to settle at the bottom, then decant into bottles. It is no good for chips, unless you like them purple, but excellent in a vinegar glaze with game.

Charcoal Burner *Russula cyanoxantha*

RUSSULACEAE • SPORESWHITE

The Charcoal Burner is a very common mushroom of mostly Beech but sometimes other woodlands, and is among the best to eat, especially raw. To the dismay of all mushroom hunters who (quite rightly) wish to know *exactly* what they are eating, the Charcoal Burner is extremely variable in appearance and has numerous (edible, fortunately) lookalikes. The cap colour is a Turner painting of greys, violets, purples, greens, browns, yellows and more. And sometimes it isn't, taking on almost any one of those colours and running with it – a completely green-capped version is particularly common (*R. cyanoxantha* var. *pelteraui*). No hope then?

There are a handful of considerations that save the day. Although it is a Brittlegill by name, it is not one by nature. With all other Brittlegills, though to a varying extent, the gills break easily when you run a fingernail across them. With the Charcoal Burner, the gills merely flex. If you wish to be absolutely sure (and you may not need to be – see below), there is a simple chemical test. Acquire some iron sulphate (green crystals used, shamefully, to remove moss from lawns) and rub it on to the white stem. There should be no colour change (to pink), just a slight, greenish tinge.

Provided you are certain that it is a Brittlegill, that it ‘looks a bit like’ a Charcoal Burner and the flesh tastes mild, you may or may not have the right mushroom, but it will still taste nice and not make you ill. This principle applies to all the Brittlegills, as explained in more detail on p. 51.

It is still worth going quickly through the characteristics of this species. It can grow to an enormous 15 cm in diameter, though 10 cm is more common; it is compact when young; the cap can be any mixture of the above-mentioned colours or just one or two, although purple dominates. The gills are pure white, as are the spore print and the stem. It is one of the earliest of the ‘autumn’ mushrooms to appear, frequently to be found in August and even July. Sadly, it is not just us who like this nutty species, and you may find most specimens to be seriously slug-eaten.

Chicken of the Woods *Laetiporus sulphureus*

POLYPOR ACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Chicken of the Woods is an amazing sight, even for those not particularly interested in fungi. It is one of the earlier fungi to appear, usually in September, but it can frequently be seen in August or even June and July,

and in the dry spring of 2018 it was found in great quantity in May! Unlike most species, it rarely waits until October. A large specimen may weigh 9 kg and be 1.5 m high; they seem to be impossible organisms. There are few fungi as conspicuous or easy to identify, but people are not always very observant.

It is surprising how far people will go to convince themselves that they have before them a particular, prized fungus. Yet Chicken of the Woods, when young and in good condition (the only time it should be eaten), is difficult to confuse with anything else. A bracket fungus that is not egg-yolk yellow and growing tiers on the trunks of deciduous trees is not going to be a Chicken of the Woods. Or, at least, it will not be an edible one, as in over-mature specimens the yellow turns to a dry beige.

While almost any bracket fungus has, at some time or other, been mistaken for a Chicken of the Woods, the only thing that approaches this fungus in appearance is the Dyer's Mazegill, *Phaeolus schwienitzii*. This has a much more lemon-yellow coloration when young, but it soon turns to a dark brown with age and is always furry underneath. This species always grows with conifers, on the ground. There is also the foxy brown Dryad's Saddle, but there is no yellow about it.

Restraint is needed should you be lucky enough to encounter a good-sized Chicken of the Woods. The best part by far is the edge of the tiers. The flesh further in is tough and relatively tasteless. So just take a few slices from the edge and leave the fungus to produce spores and maybe provide someone else with their dinner.

The flavour of this highly prized fungus is mild, but very good, and the texture is soft and slightly fibrous. Chicken of the Woods receives its name due to the similarity of its flesh to that of chickens, rather than to the shape of the bird; that honour goes to Hen of the Woods (p. 284). It is, then, the perfect meat substitute for reluctant vegetarians. One simple recipe that brings out the best in this fungus is in a creamy sauce with rice, or in a pie. If there are any bits of the fungus left over, then they will dry and powder well.

A small cloud hangs over Chicken of the Woods. There are credible reports that some people cannot eat it without being ill. Usually it is just stomach upsets, and I know of an occasion when a fairly large number of people suffered such symptoms – about 15 per cent of those who ate the fungus. A six-year-old girl in North America was taken ill after eating it. She had no gastrointestinal symptoms but suffered ataxia (bumping into

things) and hallucinations, one of which was a ‘yellow and orange monster’. Unless you like bumping into yellow and orange monsters, do try a little of this fungus before eating a whole plateful for the first time. And check the wardrobe.

Crowberry *Empetrum nigrum*

ERICACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul **Aug** Sep Oct Nov Dec

Crowberry is in the heather family and found in the same habitat – heathland. It is fussy about which heathland, however, and almost absent from heaths in England south and east of the Peak District, although the Quantock Hills and Dartmoor have populations. It grows well in Wales, but its main stronghold is Scotland. I first encountered the plant in Denmark, and was very excited to find it as it grew everywhere and produced large numbers of berries. Disappointment was soon to follow, as the flavour is bland almost to the point of non-existence. It does have food value, however, and is collected and eaten in Arctic regions, though not, it seems, with great enthusiasm.

The berry tastes better cooked: indeed, it is considered to be inedible raw. The generic name means ‘in stone’, a reference to its preferred rocky habitat and not, as one might suspect, to the hard pips it contains. These can easily be strained out and the juice used as a drink after boiling, but hardier folk will chew away at a Crowberry muffin or yoghurt.

The plant is low, at 45 cm high. The leaves are tiny, long and thin, and arranged like the tufts of a bottle-brush on the stems. The berries are blue/black. Crowberries often grow with the more edible Lingonberries (p. 232), so your afternoon will not be wasted.

Dewberry *Rubus caesius* and allies

ROSACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The humble Dewberry is usually mistaken for a Blackberry that is not trying very hard. Dewberries are small, purple and with a bloom. They are also very sharp (except in very warm summers, when they can be sweet), but of good flavour nevertheless. What makes it look poor in comparison with its brother species is that the druplets (individual lobes that make up the whole berry) are sparse and irregular, and the berry all but impossible to pick without squashing. If the odd-shaped berries do not convince you it is a Dewberry, the small size, straggling habit and soft spines will.

The plant has a vaguely southern distribution, coastal in the west and Wales and uncommon in Scotland. Curiously, the gaps in its distribution are largely filled with a related species, the Stone Bramble, *Rubus saxatilis*.

This is a red berry, and the plant is spineless, but otherwise similar in its tart flavour and untidy druplets.

Fairy Ring Champignon *Marasmius oreades*

MARASMIACEAE • SPORESWHITE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul **Aug Sep Oct** Nov Dec

The Fairy Ring Champignon is one of my favourite mushrooms, at number eight in my top ten. It is pleasant to eat simply fried, but excellent when pickled. They are very small, at only 2.5 cm or so in both diameter and height, and the stems are too tough to eat, but they can grow in vast numbers with scores of rings in a single field.

As with all small mushrooms, it is possible to get carried away and pick everything in sight that looks vaguely like whatever it is you think you are picking. Nestling in the grass with this species there may be the Fool's Funnel. This is seriously poisonous, so do take a look at it on p. 345. Do not worry, however: it is easy to tell the difference. The cap of the Fairy Ring Champignon is a pale orange/brown, drying to buff. It begins life somewhat rounded, opening up into a dome with a distinctly broad umbo (bump) on top. The gills are creamy and broadly spaced, and the stem is tough and fibrous. The spores are white, not that this is much use as so are those of the Fool's Funnel, but check anyway.

For years I have been taking mushroom forays near Tunbridge Wells on two consecutive days. One of the fields has many, many rings of Fairy Ring Champignon, but on the first day a few years ago the weather had been dry and these mushrooms were shrivelled to nothing. Overnight it rained, and the next day found them in perfect condition. This striking ability to rise from the dead is commemorated in the generic name, *Marasmius*, which is from the Greek for 'drying out'. The sugar trehalose is possibly responsible, and may also provide the mushroom with its sweet flavour. The stem of the specific epithet refers to mountains, but in this context the reference is to the mountain nymphs the Oreads, who were, arguably, a species of fairy. They are, however, rather substantial and shameless fairies if the portrayal of them by William-Adolphe Bouguereau in his painting *Les Oréades* is a reliable guide.

The Fairy Ring Champignon gives me the perfect opportunity to explain ring phenomena in fungi. Sadly it has nothing to do with fairies sprinkling fairy dust in a ring, but is just a simple growth pattern. A fungal mycelium begins at a single point and starts to feed and grow. It will soon exhaust the food supply where it is and grow to find more. It can only grow outwards, as going backwards will provide no food, and so a ring of mycelium forms. It is from this mycelium that mushrooms grow. The ring produced by an active Fairy Ring Champignon is more complex than most. It forms an inner ring of lush grass, caused by the release of nitrogen by the feeding fungus. Then there is an outer ring where the mycelium is still feeding and hoping to fruit. If you are a short mushroom, you will not want long grass as this will impede mushroom growth and spore dispersal, so – evidently a fungus that takes no prisoners – it kills the grass with hydrogen cyanide, forming a brown ring of dead grass. This is the reason that anyone in proud possession of a lawn hates this fungus. I tell them they are lucky and to stop complaining.

Giant Puffball *Calvatia gigantea*

AGARICACEAE • SPORES CHOCOL ATE BROWN

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Nothing in this book causes more excitement in the heart of the forager than the Giant Puffball. They are pure white, and they are enormous. A typical mature specimen is around 30 to 35 cm in diameter, with the British record standing at 50 cm. In America the record stands at 1.5 m. If the latter report is reliable, the puffball would weigh around 20 kilos.

The remarkable size of these fruiting bodies is compounded by their habit of growing in rings, where it is not uncommon to find twenty specimens. My friend Woody once brought fifty specimens down to Dorset in the back of his van from his home county of Herefordshire. They were all from a single field. It is difficult to know whether or not Giant Puffballs are common, due to the risk of observation bias – if they were the size of a pea, our guess would no doubt be ‘rare’. However, I see them two or three times a year throughout the summer months, and sometimes into September, and I know them from at least twenty locations. If they are threatened at all, it is by the plough, as they require time to establish in their grassland habitat. Grassland is not the only place they are found – hedges, wasteland, path-sides, compost heaps and nettle beds are all home to this fungus.

Giant Puffballs have also been known as ‘furze-balls’ (variously spelled), ‘Devil’s snuff-box’ and ‘bunt’. They have long been of use, but not so much in the kitchen, with the first recipe I can find appearing in the late nineteenth century. The use of pressed, dried, near-mature specimens is well recorded in beekeeping. The dried material is placed in a bee smoker and set alight. The resulting smoke is puffed into the hive and the bees become drowsy.

There is nothing the Giant Puffball could be confused with other than the Mosaic Puffball, which is also edible (p. 291), and maybe, from a distance, a dozing sheep.

Finding a Giant Puffball in good condition may be difficult, as many get kicked around by cattle and, shamefully, people. It is very important to pick them only when they are young, as mature specimens are completely inedible and can cause digestive problems. The flesh must be firm and pure white throughout. This can be detected by gently poking one – if it feels like a marshmallow, it will be too old. Smaller is better, as they will probably be young and the dry weight the same as an older specimen. A guide would be to pick only when they are smaller than a football.

Should you find that, despite your efforts, the puffball you have collected is too old to eat, or if you do not eat it before it matures, do not throw it in the bin. Even if damaged, it will continue to mature and produce spores. I have long run a sanctuary for retired puffballs in my garden, most of the residents having been rescued from fields where they were likely to be trampled by cattle. I once took one of them to a farm where I take mushroom forays. Despite the perfect grassland, Giant Puffballs had never been seen there. Three years after I left my retiree in a hedge, they appeared. This may, or may not, be down to my efforts but I take full credit nevertheless.

The skin should be peeled away, the flesh sliced to about 0.8 cm and then broken into biscuit-sized pieces. These should be fried in butter on one side, taken out, more butter added and the other side fried. Add salt at strategic intervals. They can either be eaten like this or beaten egg can be poured over them to make a Puffball omelette. Dipping the slices in egg and breadcrumbs and frying is even better. Do not use Giant Puffballs for any dish that can be described as ‘wet’: it will be disgusting.

Himalayan Balsam *Impatiens glandulifera*

BALSAMINACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Few plants are loved and loathed in so equal a measure. It is one of the most serious of our numerous invasive species, finding foothold in hedgerow, wood edge and, particularly, the banks of streams and rivers. We have the blasted stuff in the River Frome, which goes through our village, and in summer it can hide the water completely in narrower stretches. It does look very pretty, of course, and if it was native there would be poems written about it. I would cheerfully write that poem, but only if it were an epitaph. But we seem to be stuck with it for now and had best enjoy it as well as we can. Invasive plants are a must for the forager as, unlike, say, Marsh Samphire, the more you pick, the more ecologically friendly you are being.

Unfortunately, collecting a few seeds of this horrible plant will do nothing for conservation – it is far too well established throughout nearly the whole of lowland Britain for anyone to be able to make a difference. At least there is no guilt. There is, however, the remote possibility of prosecution, as it is illegal to plant it or cause it to grow in the wild, so be extremely careful with any seeds you collect. The young shoots, the flowers and the seeds are edible, while the mature plant is mildly toxic, containing calcium oxalate. The shoots are fairly tasteless, and I cannot be bothered about the flowers as they can only be used for salads and an indifferent wine. The *immature* pods and the seeds, however, are good. The former are

edible raw or in a stir-fry. The seeds have a nutty, slightly almond flavour. They are a favourite among foragers as an addition to a curry, but otherwise can be used like sunflower seeds.

The seeds are singular among the other seeds mentioned in this book in that they pick themselves. If you gently hold a seed head in your hand, it will ‘explode’ (a painless but disturbing sensation that you never quite get used to) and the seeds will fly everywhere. This cunning dispersal method makes collecting very easy. Any disturbance will set the mechanism in action, so I gently bend a pod-bearing stem into my butterfly net and squeeze the pods.

Lingonberry *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*

ERICACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul **Aug Sep** Oct Nov Dec

Like the Crowberry (p. 224), the Lingonberry is a plant of heathland in the north-west of Britain. It is also known as the Cowberry, this name causing nothing but confusion. Lingonberry is similar to the closely related Cranberry, sharing the helpful property of containing small, soft seeds. The latter plant is now uncommon and grows on thread-like stems with absurdly tiny leaves, while the Lingonberry is a small shrub.

Lingonberries are an indifferent fruit raw, so they are normally cooked. It is used just like the Cranberry except that the classic use is not to go with turkey on Christmas day, but to make Lingonberry jam.

Oyster Mushroom *Pleurotus ostreatus* and allies

PLEUROTACEAE • SPORES VERY PALE PINK/LILAC

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

There are several species of Oyster Mushroom, *Pleurotus ostreatus* being the best known to forager and shopper alike as it is both common in the wild and extensively cultivated and available from many supermarkets. The cultivated varieties are often brightly coloured, the blue form occasionally being seen in the wild. Oyster Mushrooms almost always grow on dead wood in the wild, while the cultivated varieties are grown on many different substrata. Someone once sent me a box full of composted coffee grounds that had been inoculated by the fungus. Within a couple of weeks, and after a certain amount of unfamiliar horticultural activity on my part, Oyster Mushrooms duly appeared from a hole cut in the side.

Visually, there is little that immediately separates the various species. The Oyster Mushroom generally lacks all but a rudimentary stem, and it

grows in tiers or small groups from dead wood, Beech being the most common substratum. They are oval/round in general shape, cream-coloured all over and the flesh is soft, and fibrous from the cap edge to the stem. The gills reach very nearly all the way to where the mushroom attaches to its substratum.

The Branching Oyster, *P. cornucopiae*, has a distinct stem, though the gills may still run all the way down it. I used to see it quite often, but its preferred habitat is dead elm, and most of these ill-fated trees have been dead for far too long. The more common Pale Oyster, *P. pulmonarius*, is less easily differentiated, being smaller and (surprise) paler, with neither characteristic being very helpful. It does, however, dry with a yellow tinge. There is also the fairly uncommon Veiled Oyster, *P. dryinus*, which grows mostly on Oak. It has a cracked surface to the cap and a veil or ring zone on the stem. Its flesh is unusually firm for *Pleurotus* species. Do not worry about these differences, as they are all edible, though the last one is a bit tough and only grows in ones and twos.

There are a few species that have the same growth habit and general shape, but which are smaller. These are the inedible oysterlings. They are easily identified as such by gills that turn brown from their brown spores. There is another unrelated species which can confuse, this time with potentially disastrous consequences, Angel Wings (p. 348), but these are restricted to the north and chiefly to Scotland.

Oyster Mushrooms can appear quite early, as they are not dependent on soil moisture levels, often fruiting when little else is around. On a good day a fallen Beech tree may be white with them. They are highly attractive to fungal gnats, which can invariably be seen as a small cloud wherever they grow. Do check that you are not taking a bag of maggots home with you.

Parasol Mushroom *Macrolepiota procera* and allies

AGARICACEAE • SPORES WHITE

Parasols are the most stately of all the edible mushrooms. They are certainly tall, at 30 cm or more, and the average cap size is about 25 cm. I have found specimens that have reached 38 cm in diameter. If you want to know where they were growing, it was in Dorset.

Size really counts when it comes to identifying this species – it is just so much bigger than almost anything else – but there is also the speckled cap, the result of the brown skin of young specimens being stretched and broken as the cap grows. This skin tends to remain as a large brown patch in the middle, which also sports a distinct bump. The stem has a very large ring which looks like a collar. With a bit of care, this can be slid up and down the stem. Horizontal brown bands can be seen on the stem, again due to the stretching of the skin; it looks rather like a snake’s skin. The base of the stem is sufficiently swollen to supply the substantial foundations this tall mushroom requires.

So distinctive a mushroom is not easily mistaken for anything else, save two or three close relatives that are also edible, but less common. *M. konradii* is similar, if not so big, and also has larger, sparser, square scales on the cap. *M. mastoidea* is a slender, pale species which, when seen from most angles, clearly deserves its specific epithet. A further species that needs to be considered is the Shaggy Parasol, *Chlorophyllum rhacodes*. This too is edible, but not for everyone, and is described on p. 299. The most serious confusion can come from some members of the genus *Lepiota* which look similar to *Macrolepiota*, albeit much smaller. *Lepiota* contains some deadly poisonous species, so do take a look at the genus on p. 342. Despite the various possible confusions, Parasols are extremely distinctive, and with just the most basic care taken, nothing bad will happen. Honestly.

As with nearly all grassland fungi, Parasols grow in rings, and I have seen fields with scores of rings and hundreds of Parasols, each mushroom enough for a meal. They can keep coming for months if the rain keeps coming too, and they will reappear after a dry spell if the rain stops and then returns. Parasols sometimes defy expectations and grow in woodland and scrubland, but check that it is not a Shaggy Parasol unless you know that you can eat these safely.

Only the cap of the Parasol is worth eating, so there is no point in uprooting them: just pull the cap away from the stem to which it is attached by a neat ball-and-socket joint. If you would prefer to cut the whole mushroom, then use the stems for a clear mushroom stock. The best stage is just as they are opening, but they will be good to eat until the cream of the gills turns to patchy brown.

Their fibrous nature allows the caps to be torn radially into sections, like slices of cake. These fibres can provide the texture of chicken if the mushroom is cooked properly, but will turn it into an unappetising mushroom-flavoured dishcloth if stewed. A quick visit to the sauté pan is much better, but by far the best method is to dip the sections into tempura batter, or coat with breadcrumbs and deep-fry them. Parasols dry successfully, but only if subsequently powdered.

Penny Bun *Boletus edulis* and allies

BOLETACEAE

There is nothing quite like wandering through an Oak or Beech wood and encountering a group of perfect Penny Buns. It is one of those heart-leaping moments that no mushroom hunter forgets. I have seen groups of twenty or more, some of them over 20 cm across, all in perfect condition. Good looks are a poor guide to edibility, but Penny Buns look extremely benign and appetising, and for once they are. Perhaps it is their similarity to a loaf of bread – or a bread roll – that makes them so appealing to the eye. Penny Bun is the English name, though the French *cèpe* or *cep* is frequently used. They are the *Steinpilze* of Germany, the *porcini* of Italy and the somewhat less euphonious *eekhoorntjesbrood* of the Netherlands. I like the English

name best because it is so descriptive (and pronounceable), down to the little dimples seen on soft bread rolls.

Beyond question, the Penny Bun is the king of mushrooms. It is the mushroom that every hunter seeks. For some, notably the commercial collector, it is the *only* mushroom they seek. It certainly fetches a high price, though the quality of those I have seen in British markets is abysmal owing to their short shelf life and long transit and storage time. Good-quality, fresh Penny Buns are superb if cooked properly (which generally means slowly), with an intense mushroom/umami flavour and a substantial texture. If you find more than can be eaten immediately, it is a species well worth drying and powdering or kept as slices.

There is much discussion about whether or not to consume the tubes that form on the underside of the cap. These are rather sticky/ slimy when mature, though firm and tasty in their cream-coloured youth. If a Penny Bun is young, then eat the lot down to the base of the stem without hesitation. If older, with soft green tubes, then cook everything if you wish, remembering that softness and slime will be yours. If this is beyond you, then peel away the tubes and dry them. The result will be honeycomb-structured ‘crisps’ with a lovely mushroom flavour.

The Penny Bun is fairly common in well-established woodland, chiefly with Oak or Beech but also with conifers. They can appear any time from July to late October, depending on rainfall. In some years a July flush will be followed by an October flush. Once you find your spot, you can go back year after year with a fair chance of finding more. Unfortunately, you may discover that someone else considers it to be *their* spot, and anxiety and recrimination will ensue. It is the well-behaved forager – one who leaves small mushrooms to grow and big mushrooms to continue producing spores by the billion – who will lose out on dinner, albeit while glowing in their virtuous intent. Worse than other mushroom hunters are slugs and maggots. Occasionally you may come across Penny Buns that have avoided the attentions of either, but it is a rare occurrence. It has crossed my mind to put down slug pellets, but I could never bring myself to do so terrible a thing.

Identification is easy, with a few confounding factors, none of which will lead you into danger. The brown cap with its dimples, the usually very swollen, white/pale-brown stem and the cream then yellow/green tubes in place of gills under the cap are enough in themselves to make one fairly certain. A few finer details that will increase confidence are a faint, fine, white, slightly raised net which can be seen on the darker surface of the stem right at the top, and the cut flesh immediately below the skin of the cap is a little pink. It is, nevertheless, a variable species (cap colour, general shape and size being the most variable characters), and some varieties have been described and named. One, at least, has been named as a species, *B. betulicola*. It has a grey cap and grows with Birch.

Assuming you are not intent on collecting species of *Boletus* with bright reds or yellows, there is little room for *dangerous* confusion. The Brown Birch Bolete, *Leccinum scabrum*, is sometimes confused by the inexperienced, but it is edible, though not so good. See p. 260 for more on this species. The worst mistake is to collect the Bitter Bolete, *Tylopilus penetrans*. It too has a brown cap and swollen stem, but the tubes are pink (unless very young) and the aforementioned ‘net’ is brown, not white. And it is spectacularly, dinner-destroyingly, bitter, a characteristic easily tested in the field.

Of slightly more concern are the closely related species that are similar in appearance and edibility but which are arguably too rare to pick. These include the rare Dark Cep, *Boletus aereus*, of southern England, and the less rare Summer Bolete, *B. reticulatis* (formerly *aestivalis*). Both have a more

extensive net on their stem and are dark-stemmed. A third species that sports a dark stem is the Pine Bolete, *B. pinophilous*. It is frequent in Scottish pine forests, uncommon elsewhere. It would be wrong to suggest that none of these should ever be collected, as none is threatened; I am merely pointing out that hunting Penny Buns requires a little care and consideration.

The Prince *Agaricus augustus*

AGARICACEAE • SPORES DARK CHOCOLATE BROWN

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul **Aug** Sep Oct Nov Dec

I get very excited when I find this superbly edible species and begin making plans for dinner. Then I look at it, and the part of my mind that values beauty above supper whispers its treachery. The Prince is as magnificent as its name suggests: a stately mushroom, ornamented with golden flecks. While not rare, it is not particularly common either: a species I see only once or twice a year and then growing only in twos or threes. Hence my hesitation and the sad fact that I have not eaten one for twenty years. But it is not a mushroom to be missed, and you should feel no pang of conscience if you have never tasted it before.

The Prince is a mushroom of roadsides and parklands. When fully open, it can grow to up to 25 cm in diameter, though 15 to 18 cm is more common. When young, the cap is hemispherical with a flattened central portion; it expands to shallowly domed. The colour is a base of cream with orange/brown scales. The mostly white stem is adorned with a large ring. It is smooth above the ring, but woolly below. It is closely related to the Horse Mushroom, with the same anise smell, and it similarly bruises a worrying yellow – but only slowly, not instantly, as with the Yellow Stainer (p. 349).

Rowan *Sorbus aucuparia*

ROSACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Considering the fact that Rowan trees are found throughout Britain and every tree produces vast quantities of easily picked berries, it is such a pity that these berries are of little use to anyone but birds. It is one of the ‘single-recipe’ ingredients, and one for which no amount of experimentation has found a convincing second recipe. I once attempted Rowan wine. The flavour was so appalling that a sprint to the sink was required at the first sip.

The single recipe, of course, is Rowan jelly, though even this hedges its bets by being, in truth, Apple and Rowan jelly. There is nothing wrong with this; it is served with meats to cut back the fats and does it well. But the berry is a little bitter, and bitterness is an all but impossible flavour to remove or moderate.

All recipes need the skin and pips sieved out at some point, another issue that argues against using this fruit. They are poisonous raw, though not when cooked. On a more positive note, the berry is rich in vitamin C, vitamin E, antioxidants and other healthy compounds.

There are several small trees that produce berries similar to the Rowan. These berries are generally speaking even less edible. The giveaway is the leaves of the Rowan, which are formed of pointed, oval leaflets arranged in half a dozen or so immediately opposite pairs.

Scarletina Bolete *Boletus luridiformis*

BOLETACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The Scarletina Bolete is avoided by most people as being far too scary to eat. The matt brown cap is the only colour that is encouraging about this fungus. The stem is blood red and yellow, and the pores just red. The flesh is a bright lemon yellow but turns ink-blue in three seconds when cut. Frightening enough, I think, to put off most mushroom hunters. Yet it is a good edible species, if not quite as tasty as its superlative cousin the Penny Bun. But anyone prepared to gird their loins and face their fears will find an abundant and perfectly acceptable fungus which few others are prepared to eat.

Like a fair number of the species in this book, it does need cooking well to destroy a toxin that can cause gastrointestinal problems. So, apart from salad, it can be treated just like a Penny Bun. There is one more consideration. A relative, the Lurid Bolete, *Boletus luridus*, is still poisonous after cooking, so do not mix them up. The latter also turns blue on cutting, but much more slowly, and it sports a similar amount of red. The only safe way to differentiate between them is to examine the red coloration at the top of the stem. In the Lurid Bolete it is caused by a red *net* against a yellow background, in the Scarletina Bolete, it is fine red *dots*. You may need a lens.

Sea Buckthorn *Hippophae rhamnoides*

ELAEAGNACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The berries of the splendid Sea Buckthorn are a ‘superfood’. Such claims are frequently made for many unfamiliar, and sometimes familiar, foodstuffs, but this time it seems to be true. The juice and seeds are packed with an entire shopping list of things you would buy in the health-food shop: vitamins A, B (1, 2, 5, 9 and 12), C, E and K, carotenoids, flavonoids,

free amino acids, fatty acids, unsaturated oils and so on and on. Sea Buckthorn's traditional reputation for sustaining health has largely been supported by a mass of trials which have found it useful in preventing or treating skin diseases, tumours, gastric reflux, gastric ulcers, liver problems and ischaemic heart disease. The plant was once used to encourage a *hippophae* (glossy coat) on horses, so is just the thing if you too want a glossy coat.

This native tree has been in the British Isles for millennia and may well have been an early coloniser after the last ice age. As more substantial trees took hold, Sea Buckthorn, it is presumed, retreated to the coastal edges. Until recently it was confined to the east coast, but it is now common around much of Britain's upper shores, having been introduced (or reintroduced) to stabilise sand dunes. It performs this function a little too well and will soon take over an area, evicting less vigorous species. Its former relative rarity may explain its neglect by the old herbalists, who have little to say about its virtues.

Sea Buckthorn has more recently become a favourite of highway authorities, who have planted it with some abandon along extensive stretches of motorways and dual carriageways. Sea Buckthorn, then, is not hard to find, though collecting berries along motorways will raise eyebrows and probably result in a difficult conversation with a police officer.

It is a lovely tree, with narrow silvery leaves reminiscent of willow; indeed it was once referred to as ‘sallow thorn’. In late July the bright orange berries become conspicuously visible, clustered densely around the stems. Some trees never produce fruit in their lives. Sea Buckthorn is dioecious (Latin, meaning ‘of two houses’), so about half of them are male, hence no fruit.

In a really good year the berries can be ripe from late July, but late August and throughout September and early October is the best time. The berries will often linger until January, but they become dull in colour and decidedly vinegary in flavour, the oils contained in the juice becoming rancid. I pick them as soon as all the berries on a branch are completely orange, with no green remaining. It is then that they are at their freshest, fruitiest and most nutritious.

Picking Sea Buckthorn berries is sufficiently difficult to be a topic of conversation among foragers. Any attempt to pick them directly will result in a burst berry and a bright orange stain on your shirt. If you only want the juice (and there is little useful to be done with the complete berry), one way is to hold a large, food-grade bucket underneath a branch and, with the other hand (suitably protected from the thorns by a thick rubber glove) ‘squidge’ downwards. This will result in bits of berry, leaves, juice and the odd invertebrate ending up in your bucket, but all the solid material can be sieved out when you get home, leaving just the juice. A similar method is to cut off the berry-laden branches and do the squidging in the comfort of home.

The best way, however, is to freeze the branches, then quickly put them in a double bin liner and beat them. The berries accumulate at the bottom of the bags while the twigs stay miraculously on top. There is still a fair amount of tedious separating out of small bits of wood and leaves, but this is hardly necessary if you only want the juice. Once defrosted, the berries retain their shape. Hacking off entire branches may sound radical, but the plant is vigorous to the point of being a nuisance and benefits from what I like to call ‘community pruning’.

The flavour of Sea Buckthorn is powerful and complex: halfway between orange juice and sulphuric acid. There is not a trace of sweetness about them.

With large quantities of intact berries the juice may be extracted by cooking the berries for a few minutes and then using a small cider press. For smaller quantities, or where you have used the squidging method, cooking gently for a few minutes then pushing through a sieve, and/or squeezing through a nylon straining bag will do the trick. The high acidity and low sugar of the juice enable it to survive for weeks in the fridge, but it is worth bottling if you wish to keep some any longer – with or without sugar. See p. 369 for details on bottling. Or you can keep it in the freezer.

The juice can be consumed as a straight drink, though a deep breath will be needed if you have not added sugar. Sweetened, it makes a great cordial, which can be diluted with water, soda water or, best of all, a sparkling wine to make a Sea Buck's Fizz. Unsweetened, it is a first-class replacement for lemon in a fish dish.

Summer Truffle *Tuber aestivum*

TUBERACEAE

Yes, Truffles can be found in Britain. In fact there are around sixteen species, most of them edible but only *T. aestivum* and *T. brumale* big enough to be worth the considerable effort of finding them. Both of these are ornamented entirely with tiny, shiny, black pyramidal structures, the whole thing looking like a lump of coal. Typically, they are around 4 cm in diameter at maturity, though occasional monsters are found. The Summer Truffle is the most common, not that anyone would know from wandering around woodland, for they are, of course, hidden underground. We never *pick* Truffles, we *hunt* them. But how?

There are a few methods, only one of which is efficient. Sometimes they just appear. I have found them dug up and slightly nibbled by squirrels, and occasionally a friend will find some after digging up or around a Beech hedge. Sometimes they can be seen nestling in a hole from which the rain has washed away the soil, the Truffle having pushed up the thin crust.

It might just be worth doing some very small and careful digs wherever you see the ground already disturbed by squirrels, or where you see a mysterious reduction in the understorey grass cover – Truffles kill grass, enabling them to be more easily dug up. But digging around under trees will damage the mycelia of Truffle and other fungal species, so it is not recommended.

The only sensible way is to get a dog. OK, you can use a pig and they do not need training, but not many people have a pig and they are not easy to move around as they weigh in at anything up to a third of a ton. Any well-tempered dog will have the potential to find truffles, and I have watched a variety of Italian mongrels work very well. The best dog, however, is a lagotto. These are Italian dogs bred for water-fowling, their powerful front legs enabling them to swim to retrieve blasted ducks and other fowl. These legs are also very good at digging, and this, combined with intelligence, a good temper and a better nose, makes them ideal.

Apart from speed, efficiency and not requiring the excavation of vast areas of woodland, the fact that a dog can locate Truffles by their smell

generally means that they will be ripe ones. Truffles, although of good food value, are flavour ingredients or, more precisely, aroma ingredients. They contain about twenty highly aromatic organic compounds designed to attract animals that eat them and subsequently deposit the spores elsewhere via natural processes. The most important chemicals are dimethyl disulfide and the unpronounceable 2-Methyl-4,5-dihydrothiophene.

A friend once took me to a beech wood in the south of England and showed me just how good a dog can be. She set off searching, and my friend could barely keep up. She would find a Truffle spot, start digging furiously and unearth the Truffle. Sometimes she ate the Truffle, sometimes the Truffle shot between her back legs and I had to retrieve it. Before the prize was safely in the bag, she was off again and digging up another one. We found thirty-six Truffles in as many minutes.

Are Truffles worth all this effort? Well, of course. However, the Summer Truffle is a poor relation of it cousins in continental Europe. These are the Black Truffle, *Tuber melanosporum*, and the White Truffle, *T. magnatum*, both of which contain more, and more complex, aromatics. Their superiority is reflected in the price, which will easily be ten times that of the Summer Truffle. However, if your Truffle is perfectly ripe, then finely sliced on to scrambled eggs it is superb.

This magnificent aroma soon fades, so use them quickly. Keeping them in the fridge does not help, as it seems to shut down the chemistry. A cool place in the kitchen, and kept in a plastic box with tissues to absorb excess moisture, is the best way. If you keep eggs, preferably quail’s eggs, in the box too, then they will take on some of the aroma.

You will not confuse the Summer Truffle with anything else – the surface is covered completely with small, shiny black pyramidal warts. Inside, the cut surface will show a greyish-brown marbling. Incidentally, the Black Truffle has much darker marbling, hence its name. All truffles are mycorrhizal species, and the Summer Truffle is most often found with Beech, Oak, Hazel and a few other broad-leaved trees. It is not found with conifers.

I have placed Truffles in August because it is their main season, but they can appear (if that is the word) at almost any time.

Tawny Grisette *Amanita fulva*

AMANITACEAE • SPORES WHITE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The Tawny Grisette is usually the first of two edible species of fungus to appear every year that few people are brave enough to eat. The second is the Blusher (see p. 257). Why would courage be needed? It is distinctive and not easily confused with inedible species, but it *is* an *Amanita*. This genus also embraces the Death Cap, Destroying Angel and Panther Cap, none of which anyone would want for tea.

Fortunately, the Tawny Grisette looks almost nothing like the dangerous *Amanita*s and has consistent and obvious characteristics that make it unmistakable. These consist of an upward-tapering stem which lacks a ring,

a white volva (sheath) at the base of the stem which is discoloured in places with orange/brown (it occasionally sticks as a broad membrane to the cap) and an orange/brown cap with conspicuous radiating grooves near the edge. In fact, there are a few species with which it may be confused (*A. crocea*, for example) but none is poisonous; they are just rare or relatively rare, and more common in the Scottish Highlands.

I suspect I have done little to allay your fears, but any walk in the woods in late summer and much of the autumn will usually find a little troop of them and you can decide then whether you are man or woman enough. The flavour is mild and pleasant, though not at the top table with the Blusher. The stem is a little fibrous, so just eat the cap.

There is one other edible species worth a mention here; the Grisette, *A. vaginata*, from which the Tawny Grisette derives its name. 'Grisette' means 'little grey thing'. 'Tawny Grisette' thus means 'little grey thing that is brown', a clear absurdity. The unfortunate epithet '*vaginata*' just means a 'sheath' and a reference to the volva, which in turn fails to ease our embarrassment. Indeed the former has a grey cap and is slightly larger, but otherwise similar. It is considered to be common by most authorities, but I see them infrequently and usually only singly. Should you encounter more and if you are sure of its identity, then do try one.

Wild Angelica *Angelica sylvestris*

APIACEAE

Wild Angelica is among the most overlooked of all our native plants. It is very common in England and Wales and super abundant in Scotland. It flowers much later than the related and far more familiar Hogweed, and is often mistaken for a late flowering of this plant. However, its slight purple tinge will distinguish it at a glance, and, unlike Hogweed, it is completely hairless. At least Hogweed is edible in the unlikely event you collect it by mistake; not so several other umbellifers – so see p. 357 for dangerous lookalikes. The leaves of Wild Angelica are very similar to those of Ground Elder, though the former is much taller. The umbels are composed of a multitude of smaller, round umbels, which look like pom-poms.

Wild Angelica is a poor relation to its flamboyant and similarly flavoured garden cousin *A. archangelica*, but it is still useful in the kitchen. Both stem and leaf of Wild Angelica have little of the aromatic flavour of cultivated angelica, so I use only the immature flowers and the seeds that form on the familiar umbel. These make an interesting vodka infusion and

can be employed wherever the aromatic flavour of angelica could be of assistance. The mature seeds can be used as a spice in a forager’s curry.

SEPTEMBER

September is the culmination of the year. Plants bring forth their fruits and seeds, and fungi cash in the food they have accumulated throughout the year to produce their mushrooms.

Bay Bolete
Beefsteak Fungus
Blusher
Blushing Wood Mushroom
Brown Birch Bolete
Burdock
Cauliflower Fungus
Chanterelle
Common Puffball
Crab Apple
Deceivers
Dog and Field Rose
Field Mushroom
Greencracked Brittlegill and allies
Hawthorn
Hazel
Hedgehog Mushrooms
Hen of the Woods
Horn of Plenty
Horseradish
Juniper
Meadow Puffball and allies
Ochre Brittlegill
Orange Birch Bolete and allies
Saffron Milkcaps
Shaggy Inkcap

Shaggy Parasol
Silverweed
Snowy Waxcap
The Miller
Trooping Funnel
Trumpet Chanterelle
Wild Plum and allies
Wood Mushroom
Yellow Swamp Brittlegill

Also found

Bilberry
Bittercresses
Blackberry
Blackthorn
Blewits
Carragheen and allies
Charcoal Burner
Chicken of the Woods
Chickweed
Coconut-Scented Milkcap
Common Mallow
Common Sorrel
Cow Bolete and allies
Crowberry
Curry Milkcap
Dandelion (roots)
Dewberryand allies
Dulse
Elder (berries)
Fairy Ring Champignon
Fennel (seeds)
Giant Puffball
Gutweed
Himalayan Balsam
Hop (flowers)
Horse Mushroom and allies
Japanese Rose (flowers and hips)
Laver
Lingonberry
Meadowsweet
Mugwort
Oak Moss

Oar Weed and allies
Oyster Mushrooms and allies
Parasol Mushrooms
Penny Bun and allies
Raspberry
Redcurrant
Rowan
Scarlet Waxcap and allies
Scarletina Bolete
Sea Beet
Sea Buckthorn
Sea Purslane
Sea Rocket
Sea Spaghetti
Serrated Wrack and allies Stinging Nettle (regrowth and seeds)
Sugar Kelp
Summer Truffle
Sweet Gale
Tawny Grisette and allies
The Prince
Watercress
Watermint and allies
Wild Angelica
Wild Marjoram
Wood Ear
Wood Sorrel
Wormwoods
Yarrow

Bay Bolete *Boletus badius*

BOLETACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The Bay Bolete is a very common species found throughout Britain, though a little less so in Scotland. It will grow with most common mycorrhizal trees, but most often with Beech. Usually it will be found in ones and twos, but sometimes the forest floor will be covered with them. It is of good, if not the best, flavour and better picked when young and firm. Older (larger) specimens will be soft and tasteless, and in wet weather they will be decidedly soggy. They are also likely to be maggoty when mature.

The bay-brown cap, orange/brown and notably cylindrical stem and the lemon-yellow tubes, which quickly bruise a grey/blue, make it a very easy mushroom to identify, with nothing dangerous with which it might be confused.

Not as tasty as the related Penny Bun, it is, nevertheless, one of my favourites for drying and powdering.

Beefsteak Fungus *Fistulina hepatica*

FISTULINACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

I was tempted to exclude the Beefsteak Fungus from the book. It has a certain amount of fame derived from its intriguing name and striking appearance; however, most of the enthusiasm for this fungus comes from people who have never eaten it. I have, several times, and hope that I will never need to eat it again, for its flavour is that of rubbery, under-ripe tomatoes.

At least it is impossible to confuse with anything else, and it is a beautiful fungus with a remarkable ability to produce copious quantities of a bloody juice when squeezed. It grows almost invariably on old Oak trees, causing a brown rot and hollowing out the tree. I do have a more positive experience of the Beefsteak Fungus than those disgusting dinners. During the first few years of infection it turns the wood a lovely red/brown. This is ‘brown oak’ and much prized by cabinetmakers. I still have two exquisite, book-matched planks left over from my cabinetmaking days and plan to create from them a masterpiece. Unfortunately I cannot think of anything I could make that is more beautiful than the bare planks.

Let me assume that you are one of the very few weird people who like the stuff (after all, a lot of people seem to like disgusting things such as chitterlings and even beetroot). Collect mature (but not disintegrating) specimens only, as these will be milder. Remove the rubbery skin, slice the remainder into ‘steaks’ and soak them for a few hours in milk. Fry gently and use them as you would steak in a stew, adding the milky-pink juice to the pot at some convenient moment and remembering to include lots of vegetables that actually taste nice. I have been a little unfair to this fungus. Using it in this way, as an ingredient, rather than on its own, does make use of its best culinary talent – it enhances the overall flavour of a dish.

One thing recommended by people who should know better is to infuse slices of Beefsteak Fungus in vodka and a little sugar. You do not need to try this, as I already have.

The Blusher *Amanita rubescens*

AMANITACEAE • SPORES WHITE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

On one of my first forays with the British Mycological Society, nearly forty years ago, I was invited by one of the participants to his caravan for dinner. On the menu was the Blusher. I had eaten many different species by that time, but never this one, which is, after all, an *Amanita*, a genus that contains several deadly species. But my new friend seemed to know his stuff, and I ate them. They were superb. I put them on my list of species to eat, but it was twenty-five years before I summoned up the courage to pick them for the table myself. This was a long time, but I fancy it is extreme caution that has kept me alive all these years.

I do not suggest you wait so long, but the Blusher is not a beginner's mushroom – a few years of experience is needed before you tackle any *Amanita*. Despite this warning, the Blusher is one of the easiest of

mushrooms to identify for anyone willing to look closely. Chief among its noteworthy characters is the one indicated by its names – when damaged its white flesh and gills turn *slowly* pink. This is often and helpfully seen on a cap that has been nibbled by slugs, where the colour has had time to develop. Handling the stem will also result in a reddening, but it is a little quicker. The cap is a bronzed red/brown and covered with fine, movable scales which are a dirty grey/brown/pink. The ring on the stem has grooves on its upper surface. The Panther Cap is the dangerous species with which the Blusher is most likely to be confused, but can be distinguished by white scales on a brown cap and no grooves on the ring. I promise that all this is not as difficult as it sounds!

The flavour and texture are very good, and it is one of the few fungi that has a history of collection in Britain going back to the nineteenth century at least. It was once called the ‘Warty Cap’. It absolutely *must* be cooked, as it is poisonous (though not deadly) when raw. It occurs in both coniferous and deciduous woodlands and is very common, often appearing in August and even June.

Blushing Wood Mushroom *Agaricus sylvaticus*

AGARICACEAE • SPORES DARK BROWN

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The genus *Agaricus* is divided into several ‘sections’. The Horse Mushroom and allies are in the section Arvenses, for example. The Field Mushroom, along with several other similar species, is in the section Agaricus (because it was the first in the *Agaricus* genus to acquire that generic name and takes precedence), and *A. sylvaticus*, along with *A. langei* and a few, rare others, is in the Sanguinolenti. So now you know.

Although this all sounds very complicated, it reflects the fact that within a genus there are groups of species with similar characteristics and that spotting these characteristics helps narrow the field when trying to identify a particular species. One of the things that differentiates some of the sections in *Agaricus* is colour, or colour change. The Xanthodermatei (Yellow Stainers) instantly bruise yellow; for Arvenses it is a slow change to yellow. For Sanguinolenti the flesh is blood red when cut, which is precisely the case with the Blushing Wood Mushroom. There was once a species within the section for which the blood-red colour was particularly startling, providing it with the equally startling name, *Agaricus haemorrhoidarius*. This is now considered to be *A. sylvaticus* and the name is lost, though no one seems to miss it.

The Blushing Wood Mushroom is fairly small, growing to no more than 10 cm in diameter, and often much less. The cap is a mass of triangular, brown scales against a white background. The stem bears a fragile ring, with brown cogwheel markings below. The stem is white, browning with age and with a bulbous base. The flesh in the cap and the upper stem is blood red when cut.

There is also the much less common (or overlooked) Scaly Wood Mushroom, *A. langei*. It is almost identical to *A. sylvaticus* but has a club-shaped stem rather than one with a swollen base. Both species are dedicated forest dwellers, though not too fussy about what type of forest.

Brown Birch Bolete *Leccinum scabrum*

BOLETACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The ubiquitous Brown Birch Bolete is the most common edible bolete that you are likely to find, certainly if you are wandering around a Birch wood. It looks a little like the Penny Bun and does occasionally mislead those new to the sport. Its flavour and texture, however, are very poor by comparison, and it is only worth collecting when very young and firm, when it makes a passable addition to other mushrooms. The habitat, brown cap, long pale

stipe ornamented with lines of dark dots, grey/buff tubes and the failure of the cut flesh ever to turn blue (though it does sometimes turn pink) make it easy to identify. There are several species that look very much like it, and some of these are rare, but the flesh of these will discolour, usually turning blue.

Should you find yourself tempted to collect a large quantity, then my go-to solution for making good use of otherwise less than appetising fungi is to dry and powder them. I have a large jar full of Brown Birch Bolete powder on my kitchen shelf, and it goes into nearly everything savoury that I cook.

Burdock *Arctium minus*

ROSACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

There is little to love about this notorious despoiler of woolly jumpers and expensive haircuts. The dreaded seed heads are surrounded by hooked spikes which lock on to anything fibrous that is foolish enough to get that close. Incidentally, I learned only recently that to remove them you should break the ‘burr’ in half and turn it inside out.

The most useful culinary part of the plant is the large root. Burdock is a biennial, so the best time to collect it is at the end of its first year and before it starts its second year’s growth, when it produces its flowers and seeds. Any later and the root will be very tough. It may still need some serious peeling to remove any fibrous exterior.

Digging up Burdock roots can be either easy or very difficult. I found some once in a coniferous forest clearing on very sandy soil, and the roots could simply be plucked from the ground. In heavier soils it may require the services of a pick axe to make any headway. The roots in stony soils are particularly troublesome as they split into multiple roots, wrapping themselves around the rocks and holding themselves in place with great tenacity. Fortunately, you will have no trouble in finding Burdock as it is a very common weed, growing nearly everywhere in lowland Britain in hedgerows, neglected fields, forest clearings and wastelands. You could fall foul of the law, which bans the uprooting of plants without the landowner’s permission, but I have never met anyone who actually *wanted* Burdock on their land, so permission should be very easy to obtain. You could even charge them for the service.

The only use the British now have for the plant is in Dandelion and Burdock beer and related drinks, or in the herbal treatment of a suspiciously long list of diseases. It was one of the plants collected during the Second World War to support the war effort, no doubt to produce beer of an alcoholic or non-alcoholic nature, with the presumed medical benefits perhaps at the back of the mind of those who organised such things. For the Japanese, however, it is a mainstream ingredient. The soft centre is cut into thin strips and stir-fried. The flavour is slightly bitter but pleasant and quite rich, but then it is that rare thing – a starchy wild food.

Cauliflower Fungus *Sparassis crispa*

SPAR ASSIDACEAE

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The Cauliflower Fungus can outdo even the Giant Puffball in size. I have a photograph of one I found many years ago that is bigger than the large basket sat next to it. The sight of one of these monsters resting at the base of a Pine tree inspires awe in everyone and ecstasy for the forager. It is a very good fungus to eat, with a mild, nutty flavour and a texture like that of cooked tagliatelle.

It is impossible to confuse with any other fungus. The general shape is rounded and made up of beige, flattened, twisting fronds, which arise from branching stems below. Cut in half, it looks even more like a cauliflower. It grows as a mild parasite at the foot of Scots Pines, though sometimes with other species of conifer. It is fairly common, and it's a poor year indeed when I do not find it twice. Once you have found a place it grows, remember to go back next year, and the year after.

A certain amount of forager's etiquette has developed around this fungus. If I find one, I never take it all but cut about a third of it away, leaving the rest to produce spores, and leaving some for other foragers. If I find one with a slice taken out of it, I will take a third of what is left and so on. Courtesy of Zeno and his famous paradox, this way, no matter how many times it is cut, there will always be some left …

So intricate and branching an object lying on the forest floor invariably fills up with dirt, Pine needles and a host of invertebrates seeking shelter. It

is therefore necessary to wash the Cauliflower Fungus thoroughly, though you are bound to eat at least one crunchy woodlouse.

Chanterelle *Cantharellus cibarius*

CANTHARELLACEAE • SPORES WHITE

The Chanterelle is also known as the Girolle. It has been suggested that the latter is different in some way – more robust and with a finer flavour – but I can find no evidence that it is a different species or even a *form*. Whichever name you choose, it is still a prized and very common mushroom.

Sometimes Chanterelles will carpet the forest floor, turning it golden. In a good year, in a good place, one may simply tire of collecting them, and search out rarer delicacies. They are found in moss and leaf litter in open forests of the big five: Beech, Oak, Birch, Pine and Spruce. Identification is reasonably straightforward: bright golden yellow, irregular edge to an eventually upturned cap when the fungus becomes trumpet-shaped, forking wrinkles in place of gills, short stem. The whole fruit body is longitudinally fibrous – meaning that you can tear it in half vertically. A good handful of fresh specimens will provide the signature smell of this species – apricots – though it is rather faint. Their season is long, sometimes from July to December, and often with more than one crop in a year. They are also slow-growing, so only pick those of a reasonable size (cap diameter a minimum of 3 cm, perhaps) and leave the rest to get bigger and also to release their spores.

There are three things to look out for when picking Chanterelles. The first issue is – you guessed it – the annoyingly common False Chanterelle, *Hyprophoropsis aurantiaca* (pictured here for comparison). On occasions this species will catch out even an experienced forager like myself, though only for a moment. False Chanterelles are, unfortunately, extremely variable in appearance and size, so it is not always immediately obvious when you have one. Generally, they are more orange (often with a black stem) and symmetrical, the gills are true gills, not rib-like wrinkles, and their overall texture is rather papery – flaccid, in fact. One trick that works for most of the time, though only in southern England, is that Chanterelles found in Pine or Spruce plantations are much more likely to be False Chanterelles. Should your observational skills fail you all the way to the kitchen, then nothing terrible will happen. If they are poisonous at all (open to debate), it is only very mildly so. Tasteless, fibrous and certainly not Chanterelles, only disappointment and loss of self-respect await if you get it wrong.

A second potential error, one that is much more serious while being much less likely, is to confuse the Chanterelle with *Omphalotus illudens*, the Jack-o'-Lantern. I have seen it only once in my life, and it is indeed a very rare fungus and classed as 'near threatened'. Two things will result from eating this species: fairly serious poisoning and, once recovered, guilt from picking something so rare. The common name derives from the

species' reputed trick of glowing in the dark. Bioluminescence is known in several lineages of the fungal world, so it is not unlikely. *O. illudens* is easy to distinguish from its edible lookalike. It grows at the base of trees and on tree roots, not among leaf litter and moss, and the gills are 'proper' gills – narrow and sharp-edged and not forking. Anyway, it is worth making a rule never to eat anything that glows in the dark.

The third problem is that of rare, related *Cantharellus* species that may be confused with Chanterelles. As with so many groups of species, there are a handful of fungi that are seen all the time and more that are rare or exceedingly rare. A white form exists, and I see it fairly frequently; some authors consider it a species, *C. pallens*, but either way it is rare and should be left. The most beautiful of the rare *Cantharellus* species is *C. melanoxeros*. It too is yellow, but more green/yellow than the golden yellow of the Chanterelle, and blackens when handled. There are a mere twenty (official) records of it, and it is classed as 'vulnerable'. I have seen it only once (with great joy).

So beautiful and well-flavoured a mushroom as the Chanterelle needs thoughtful cooking, and longer in the pan than you might imagine. I do not suggest that you follow one nineteenth-century recipe in which they were simmered gently with butter, milk and egg yolk for 'an hour or so', but the 'simmer gently' part, at least, is good advice. Twelve minutes should do it.

False Chanterelle on the right

Common Puffball *Lycoperdon perlatum*

AGARICACEAE

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As one is entitled to expect, the Common Puffball is by far the most common species among the puffballs. Usually it appears in small troops of half a dozen, but sometimes it will grow in its hundreds, turning a roadside, bank or woodland floor white. The skin is covered in small granules which come away on your fingers and then proceed to cover every other mushroom in your basket. Only immature specimens should be collected. These will be white to white-with-a-hint-of-grey on the outside and white on the inside, with no sign of yellow or green, by which stage they will be unpleasant in flavour and texture and likely to cause mild gastric distress. If left in peace, the puffball will become brown and then wet from the water it expels during maturation. Finally, a small hole appears at the very top, and the interior becomes a mass of dry, brown, dusty spores held in a complex of fibres. A drop of rain from a cloud or dripping from the tree canopy will compress the now thin and flexible skin and expel a puff of spores. By the way, do not breathe in the spores, as they may prove a challenge to your immune system.

All puffballs are edible, and the Common Puffball comes second only to the Giant Puffball in desirability. Its flavour is, indeed, good, but at the cost of a great deal of peeling for a small amount of flesh. While it is possible to eat it skin and all, it is distractingly chewy, like eating a toffee with the wrapper on. Species within *Lycoperdon* are all pear-shaped. The round half (top) will form the spore mass, while the narrow half will form a spongy stem. This differentiation is visible even in immature specimens; cut in half vertically, the white flesh of the proto-spore mass is slightly creamy, while that of the proto-stem is pure white. The former is of better flavour than the latter and also peels much more easily, so break off the top, roll it very gently between your palms and peel. There is another possibility. I keep meaning to crisp up the skin of the whole fungus by deep-frying. It would be necessary to hold them under the oil with the bottom of a chip-frying basket. I set this as a project for your homework.

It is odd to think that the puffballs are in the same family as Field Mushrooms and Inkcaps but in a different family from the earthballs, which are even in a different order. But it is all down to evolutionary descent, not general shape. Earthballs are the only species that you are likely to confuse

with puffballs, though it is very unlikely in the case of Common Puffballs or related species because of their shape. See p. 353 for more on earthballs.

Crab Apple *Malus sylvestris*

ROSACEAE

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An autumn drive along any road in Britain will reveal frequent apple trees. These are often laden with fruit which invariably falls and is left to rot. They are unlikely to be Crab Apples, but instead are the offspring of discarded apple cores and animal dispersed seeds from cultivated trees. The cultivated apple is a different species, the non-native *Malus pumila*, though other species of *Malus* have also been introduced, mostly for ornamental purposes.

Practicalities are everything to the forager and an apple is an apple, so if they are accessible there is no reason not to collect them just because they are not Crab Apples. I am well known for my emergency foraging stops, pulling on to the verge at the last second when I see such a tree. There is no knowing what the apple will be like, as apple species do not breed true. So a Gala apple pip may produce something better or, more likely, something worse. Nearly all such apples I collect are destined to become apple juice (and possibly cider), and it is a poor apple indeed that makes a juice that is undrinkable.

The Crab Apple has been around since Neolithic times and were a favourite food for a people that had never experienced the joy of eating a Russet. It is recognised by the small size of the fruit, at no more than 3 cm in diameter and yellow or green. The leaves are different too, with the Crab Apple having leaves that are smooth all over, whereas the leaves of the cultivated apple are slightly downy underneath.

It is a common tree in England, but for some reason relatively rare in the far south-west, south-east and north-west. It is less common also in Scotland and Wales. Crab Apple trees insist on good light and so are found on wood edges, in woodland clearings and internal farm hedgerows.

I don’t know anyone (apart from the occasional child) who would eat a raw Crab Apple with pleasure. The flesh is dry, sour and astringent, and compromised further by the skin, pips and ‘toenails’ that come with it. Something, then, needs to be done to make it edible. Even though it is something that can readily be collected by the hundredweight, it is a species with a reputation for belonging to the dread ‘single recipe’ group of wild foods – the recipe in this case being Crab Apple jelly. This jelly is very good indeed, but fortunately it is not all that the Crab Apple has to offer.

Once you have your collection of Crab Apples, remove any bad ones and keep any that are not to be used in the shed and unwashed. They will survive for several months if kept well, and a surprisingly long time even if kept badly. When they are needed, give them a thorough wash, which may

well involve a scrubbing brush. Cleaning is especially important when Crab Apples are used to add some extra and much needed tannin to a cider otherwise made from dessert apples. Crab Apples are a near-essential ingredient in a fruit leather. See p. 370 for how to make this forager's standby.

My favourite Crab Apple recipe is for a vodka infusion. Slice the Crab Apples about 3 mm thick and pack them in a jar with a layer of sugar between each layer of slices. Top up the jar with vodka and screw up a piece of aluminium foil to place on top to keep them submerged. Decant off the vodka after a year (sorry), and you will have a truly wonderful apple liqueur. Do not throw away the slices, but use them in a compote or something, mashing them and sieving out the pips, skin and, yes, the toenails.

Deceiver *Laccaria laccata* and **Amethyst Deceiver** *Laccaria amethystina*

ENTOLOMATACEAE • SPORES WHITE

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These two extremely common woodland mushrooms have worrying common names. However, their deception is that they look completely different from the last time you saw them: in other words, they display high morphological variability. They are almost identical to each other except that one is orange/brown, the other a fabulous purple. Within each species, a huge range of sizes and shapes is exhibited: from 1.5 to 7 cm cap diameter, and caps that vary in shape from hemispherical to upturned and wrinkling. Frequently the cap edges are ornamented with grooves.

It is, therefore, the consistent characters that count when identifying these species. They are: a hygrophanous cap (one that turns substantially paler, almost white, when it dries and ages), a cap that is finely scurfy, and a tough, fibrous, twisting stem. As with most fungi, it is practice and experience that matter, and I can identify them at a glance, only occasionally getting caught out by their deceptive ways.

Deceivers are, surprisingly, mycorrhizal species, found chiefly with Oak and Beech. They are relatively small, and the stem is not used as it is too tough to eat, so you may well wonder if they are worth picking. Fortunately they are very common and can be found when little else is making an appearance. Their flavour is mild, but good.

Dog Rose *Rosa canina* and **Field Rose** *Rosa arvensis*

ROSACEAE

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The Dog Rose and Field Rose are the two common wild roses of Britain, although the latter species is restricted to England and Wales, coming to an unusually sudden halt level with Scarborough. The Dog Rose is common throughout most of Britain, but with a complex distribution that leaves a few conspicuous holes, such as most of Lincolnshire and much of Yorkshire.

Distinguishing between the two species is not of any great importance to the forager. They both produce delicate, mildly scented flowers, and both produce rosehips. Both species sprawl over hedges and wood edges, making a glorious picture in high summer.

There is little worth doing with the flowers apart from sprinkling some petals over a salad, though leaving them in the hedgerow for everyone to see is perhaps better. The perfume is barely detectable, except on a warm, still day, and then only faintly. The hips, however, are extremely useful and begin to ripen in August. Pick them when they are completely red and with no green visible. Do not worry that they are too hard or too soft, because there is no ‘just right’ with rosehips – they always seem to be either under-ripe or over-ripe. I collect them all, rock hard or squidgy soft, and into the

pan they go. There is no need to pull them from the rose bush: just grasp a hip, bend it sideways by 90° and it will come away.

Since the only thing worth collecting from our wild roses are their hips, and the only thing worth making from these small hips is rosehip syrup, the wild roses are effectively single-recipe species. Well, there are a couple of other, minor, recipes, and I will come to them shortly, but the syrup is so good that it is more than worth picking rosehips for this alone.

The baby boomers were brought up on rosehip syrup, which is why we have Mick Jagger, Tim Berners-Lee and Mary Beard. My mother used to give me a spoonful every day, and it was the same for most of us. Rosehips contain vitamin C in large quantities. During and just after the war citrus fruits were unobtainable, and not many people could stomach sufficient quantities of Scurvygrass. Rosehips were universally available, and armies

of children and others set out into the countryside to collect them. The children were particularly enthusiastic because they could earn a badge and some pocket money. In 1950 it was possible to earn 3d. a pound (about 40p for 450 g in today's terms), and a limit was eventually introduced because there is only so much rosehip syrup you can make or need.

Cover the washed hips in 3 cm of water. They actually float, so you either need to use your psychic powers or pour in water until the level of the hips is raised by 3 cm. Boil them gently until they are all, or nearly all, soft. Mash them with a potato masher to make a pulp. Unfortunately, your trusty blender is no use here. It is essential to remove all the pips and, critically, the irritating hairs that are attached to them – a blender will just make the hairs impossible to sieve out. Allow the paste to cool to a temperature you can handle, and pour it into a single layer of fairly coarse straining mesh draped into a large bowl. Squeeze and squidge away until you can get no more sieved puree out. Now repeat the process, this time pouring the liquid into a double layer of muslin draped over a saucepan (it should be easier this time). This will ensure that most of the fine hairs are removed. Add as much sugar as you like to the saucepan; heat and stir until the sugar has dissolved. Poured while still very hot into sealable bottles or jars, the syrup will last a few weeks with luck and maybe a fridge, but proper bottling is needed if you wish to keep some until the next season (see p. 369).

Apart from the time-honoured manner of downing the odd spoonful for your health, what can you do with rosehip syrup? It is good poured on pancakes, panna cotta, sponge cake, ice cream and so on. My favourite use is in cocktails. These are, perhaps, not *quite* cocktails, as they are sweet and often long. An example is the Pink Pint, which is described on p. 180. A better example, and one which is a true cocktail, is to replace tomato juice in a Bloody Mary with syrup – a Bloody Rosie.

While we are on the merry subject of cocktails, it is worth mentioning rosehip/vodka infusion. Pack some uncooked rosehips into a jar with sugar to taste and top up with vodka. Leave for six months before decanting.

It is just about possible to deseed rosehips, but you will need to be thorough. Once you have achieved this minor and tedious miracle, the husks are available for candying, pickling and cooking. The Japanese Rose, *R. rugosa* (p. 178), has much, much larger hips and is considerably easier to deseed.

Field Mushroom *Agaricus campestris*

AGARICACEAE • SPORES DARK CHOCOLATE BROWN

Field Mushrooms were the first wild mushrooms that ever came to my attention, *circa* 1956, when my grandmother told the household that she was going out very early the next morning to pick some. It was still daylight, so I wondered why she was not setting off immediately. She told me that they sprang up overnight and so she needed to be there before anyone else.

This intriguing conversation may well have been instrumental in my choice of amateur mycologist as a calling. Field Mushrooms do not in fact appear overnight, but what they can do is expand and grow upwards from button size in the few hours between dusk and dawn. They have been nestling in the grass, putting on dry weight; then they absorb a lot of water through their mycelium and expand.

I often hear people say that they are too anxious to pick anything but Field Mushrooms. While this philosophy will (mostly) protect from deadly woodland species, it does not guarantee freedom from being ill. The truth is that many more people are poisoned as a result of picking what they think are Field Mushrooms than from attempting to pick all of the other edible species combined. The culprit is the Yellow Stainer, which looks remarkably like the Field Mushroom, so take a look at this species on p. 349.

Field Mushrooms are white, but so are button Death Caps. One lady was poisoned making this mistake with a single, small Death Cap finding its way into her basket of Field Mushrooms. It is an easy mistake to make, but also an easy one to avoid. Pick mushrooms away from the hedge, especially a hedge that contains Oak or Beech, and do look carefully at every mushroom you pick before consigning it to your basket.

The Field Mushroom grows from the round button stage to completely flat. The cap is white, discolouring with age. The skin of the cap overhangs it. The gills are pink when young, turning dark brown from the spores with age. The stem is short, fibrous and has a small, fragile ring.

Most of the larger field fungi grow in rings, and I have known fields with a hundred Field Mushroom rings. There are fewer such fields now, as the plough has destroyed most of them. Field Mushrooms seem to recover or establish fairly quickly, so a field may grow them again within ten or so years after ploughing; they do not need ancient grassland. They seem to like grazed land, and they particularly like land that has been grazed by horses. The flavour of Field Mushrooms is quite different from that of the cultivated mushroom, *A. bisporus*. It is fresher and more earthy, but I would not say that it is better or worse, just different. There is a great deal of difference in flavour between a young specimen and one that is mature, the latter having a nice bitter intensity.

Simply frying them in butter and serving on toast is by far the best way to prepare Field Mushrooms. There are other ways of using it, of course. The Victorians seem to have turned all their Field Mushrooms into ketchup, and there are many recipes from that time of varying degrees of unpalatability and toxicity (from the ridiculous quantities of salt required). The liquid component of the mushrooms is sweated out by the application of the salt and then boiled with spices.

Greencracked Brittlegill *Russula virescens* and allies

RUSSULACEAE • SPORES WHITE TO PALE CREAM

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The Greencracked Brittlegill is such a beautiful mushroom that I can seldom bring myself to eat one. The cracked cap is highly distinctive, and the pale green has something of 1930s chic about it. It can grow to nearly 12.5 cm diameter but is typically only 7.5.

Greencracked Brittlegill

The smaller Powdery Brittlegill is a little more common than the Greencracked and almost as distinctive. In this case, the cap is a greyish blue/green and seemingly finely dusted with flour. Both occur in deciduous woodlands.

There is little more to be said about these species, apart from them both having a pleasant and nutty flavour, and delivering the usual warning about green mushrooms: the Death Cap has a green cap too. This is, however, unlikely to be a concern in these cases, as the latter has so many characteristics lacking in any Brittlegill.

Powdery Brittlegill

Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*

ROSACEAE

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Hawthorn is a small but lovely tree, painting the countryside in spring with its frothy white and pink May blossom and in the autumn with its red berries. It is likely to be our commonest tree because of the millions that were planted during the various inclosure periods when the common, open-field system was replaced, painfully and slowly, by private ownership. Inevitably, this required much smaller fields, fields that needed to be hedged. Hawthorn was the tree of choice, and nurseries sprang up in their hundreds to supply the new and growing market.

Hawthorn is the best tree for hedgerows because it is vigorous, long-lived, tolerates the violent indignities of being laid, and possesses stock-deterring thorns. A pity, then, that it produces nothing very much to quicken the pulse of the forager. The blossoms can, at a pinch, be made into a wine or a sugar syrup, but both will have a slight hint of fish because of the trimethylamine that the flowers contain. The berries are small, with one very large pip in the middle (hence *monogyna* – of one womb) and a thin

layer of near-tasteless flesh covered by the familiar red skin. What to do with it?

The one advantage that ‘haws’ – for so they are called – possess is their superabundance. Trillions must grow throughout Britain, only a tiny few picked by anyone but birds, and even the birds are not so enthusiastic about them. They also grow densely packed on the branches, and, apart from being a little fiddly, they can be picked quickly.

The most imaginative cooks in the world have come up with few recipes, but they are worth trying. They fall into three categories – sauces, jellies and alcoholic infusions. An example of the first is to pack the haws into a jar and add sweetened cider-apple vinegar. For the second the haws are

cooked (with or without apples or Blackberries or Elderberries, etc.), mashed gently and the pips laboriously sieved out. Sugar is added and the mix boiled to make Hawthorn jelly. The great standby for using difficult hedgerow fruits such as haws, Elderberries and Crab Apples is a fruit leather (see p. 370 for the recipe). Among the several alcoholic possibilities, packing haws in a jar with sugar and topping it up with gin to make haw gin takes some beating. Whichever path you follow, the result will be healthy, as haws are famously good for the heart.

Hazel *Corylus avellana*

BETULACEAE

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The first two weeks or so of September is hazelnut time. Full-size nuts have been on the tree for weeks but they are green, and even the brown ones may contain only an immature nut. Only when they are truly ready to fall are they worth collecting, though some people like the fruitiness and slight astringency of green hazelnuts. They form in clusters of three or four and will almost drop into the open hand when thoroughly ripe. Those on the ground *may* contain ripe nuts, but more often they are empty discards, the tree concentrating its efforts on the nuts that have a chance of full development. I have met many people who, having spent a happy hour innocently gathering hazelnuts, discover that they have 4 kilos of empty shells. It is worth taking a blanket or sheet with you to catch the nuts that fall while you are picking ripe ones. Indeed, this can be a simple way of collecting most of the ripe nuts from the tree, by beating and shaking it, those that are ripe falling safely into the blanket. Even then it is worth checking a few nuts to make sure you will be coming home with *something*.

Wood edges and internal farm hedges are the best places to find ripe nuts. Roadside Hazels are often cut back under the direction of the local council and will be barren, on one side at least. Hazels growing within a wood are relatively unproductive because of the restricted light. Wherever you find your nuts, you will likely have competition from grey squirrels. They will even eat them when they are small and green. Being beaten by squirrels is a constant forager's complaint against this charming little pest.

The Hazel is found throughout lowland Britain, with a slight preference for the southern counties of England. Are they worth the effort required to gather them? Considering the quantities of shells found in prehistoric digs, our ancestors certainly thought so. The nuts are undoubtedly tasty and, of course, you have the forager's bonus of eating what you collect.

Hedgehog Mushroom *Hydnum repandum* and allies

HYDNACEAE

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Hedgehog Mushrooms are a gift to anyone new to mushroom hunting. It is number two on my list of easy-to-identify edible fungi, coming second only to the Giant Puffball. In fact, it is the mushroom with everything. It is unmistakable, common, almost never gets maggots, of good flavour and texture and has a very long season. I have only heard of one sin attributed to this otherwise virtuous fungus. My friend Liz, a big fan of Hedgehog Mushrooms, found that she could no longer eat them because they made her breasts swell. I have my own opinion on this, but the point here is that it is possible to eat something for years without the slightest problem, only to become allergic to it later.

The key identification characters are a cap which is always irregular in shape, buff-coloured and matt (like fine chamois leather); the underside of the cap is covered in small, fragile pale buff spines (hence ‘hedgehog’); the flesh is firm and white to buff; and the stem is never central to the cap. In cross-section the underside of the cap is shallowly convex and the spines will run down the stem a little (decurrent). Hedgehog Mushrooms always grow in woodland, and are as happy with Pine and Spruce as with Beech and Oak. They frequently grow in rings, and on a good day you can see dozens of such rings across the forest floor.

It is worth mentioning the Terracotta Hedgehog. It is usually much smaller than its cousin, has a central stem, orange/brown cap, pale orange/brown elsewhere and the spines are not decurrent. Sometimes, notably in Spruce plantations, it can form vast carpets.

Nothing else looks like the Hedgehog, as nothing else shares all its characteristics, but there are other species with spines. Do not worry: these impostors are very easily avoided. There are several, closely related, species that have spines and a stem, but all lack the buff colours. There is also a group of species that *are* white/buff in colour and with spines (though the spines are usually much longer). These have no stems and grow on dead wood, not on the ground. However, dead trees eventually fall over, and I have seen these species appearing to grow from the ground and looking remarkably like Hedgehog Mushrooms. None of these species is poisonous; in fact they are good to eat, but they are all rare, some exceedingly so, and one, the Lion's Mane Fungus, *Hericium erinaceus* (see p. 25), is protected by law in Britain. None of these species should be collected or disturbed. Rather oddly, the Lion's Mane Fungus is cultivated for food on a vast scale and can be bought, dried, in delicatessens or even grown at home if you want one fresh. It seems to be following the same path as the now extinct aurochs, which is represented in huge numbers by its agricultural descendants, cattle.

Hedgehogs have a mild, nutty flavour. Uncooked they are quite bitter and a good amount of cooking is needed before this disappears. They do not dry well. Even when blitzed into a powder they are little use, tasting and looking like powdered wine corks.

Hen of the Woods *Grifola frondosa*

MERIPIL ACEAE

Hen of the Woods looks like a brooding hen sat under an Oak tree. Chicken of the Woods (p. 222), with which it is often confused in the mind, if not the field, is a completely different species, from a different family, and does not look like a hen – or a chicken, come to that. Hen of the Woods forms a

large, tiered structure at the base of trees. The tiers are grey on top, with a white edge, white underneath and leaf-like, arising from tightly clustered white branches. The tree is nearly always Oak, but it has been found quite frequently on Beech and even on Hazel and Sweet Chestnut.

It is a common species but a spectacular find, which will result in the opening of any handy bottle of champagne. I once found a spot where every other Oak tree bore a Hen of the Woods and, being alone, settled for my hip flask of sloe gin. The flavour is very good, and it does have a pleasant texture. Youth (its, not yours) is important, as it can become a little bitter and fibrous with age and can also fill with maggots. The texture makes it perfect for anyone who has eschewed meat but still craves it.

While nothing dangerous can be mistaken for this species, it has a larger relative, which some people eat. Not, I suspect, that they eat it with great pleasure. It is the Giant Polypore, *Meripilus giganteus*. It lives up to both its names and is sometimes conspicuous on urban roadsides and in parks where a dead or dying tree has been cut down by the authorities, the fungus being

the cause of the tree's demise. The large, plate-like brackets are cream underneath and bruise noticeably and instantly grey.

Horn of Plenty *Craterellus cornucopioides*

CANTHARELLACEAE • SPORES WHITE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Mushroom hunters guard their Horn of Plenty patches with more than usual vigour. We are happy to share Chanterelle spots, if not the best ones, but with this black gem of a mushroom it is immediate blood descendants alone whom we tell, and then only on our deathbeds. It is among the most highly prized of all mushrooms and not very common, though it is a poor year when you find not one. It is also black on top and grey underneath, and almost impossible to see unless you are looking hard. Fortunately, when you do find one, you are assured of finding more, often many more, as they grow in dense colonies and reappear in the same spot most years. A single find can fill your dried-mushroom jars for the year to come. For most of the species in this book some restraint is needed when collecting, and for this mushroom you will need the self-control of a saint.

As you can see from the family name, the Horn of Plenty is related to the Chanterelle, and with squinted eyes it is possible to see a family resemblance. The Horn of Plenty is just a long, hollow cone, curled around at the top. The grey surface on the outside cone is the fertile layer on which the spores form. It is almost completely smooth, with none of the gill-like ridges of the Chanterelle.

The flavour of this mushroom is superior to that of just about any other. It is very good when eaten fresh, but the mushroom intensity when dried and powdered is much stronger. If you find more than you can eat fresh, then do dry some to add to just about anything.

Horseradish *Armoracia rusticana*

BRASSICACEAE

The bright leaves of the Horseradish are a common sight along roadsides and in waste places, though few people recognise it for what it is. Its preferred habitats indicate that it is not a native plant, and indeed it appears to have originated in eastern Europe and slowly made its way west. In Britain it is found in the lowlands of England south from Hull, and coastal and uncommon elsewhere. For some reason it is one of the few wild plants in this book that is common in the ‘dead zone’ between Peterborough and The Wash.

The common name seems to be a case of the British not paying attention when transliterating foreign words. The name used through much of Europe was *Meer-radys* or similar, meaning ‘sea radish’. The British thought ‘meer’ was some foreign word for ‘mare’, a female horse, and the damage was done.

The plant is very distinctive but seems to present a challenge to many by its vague similarity to dock. Although both possess long, generally upright leaves, those of the Horseradish are a pale but vivid green, have a more distinct ‘fishbone’ pattern from the veins, have a bluntly serrated edge and lack any hint of red. If you are still unsure, then carefully pull a leaf from as close to the base of the plant as possible. The base of the leaf stem will taste strongly and immediately of Horseradish.

The more serious problem of digging up the wrong plant can sometimes occur when the leaves disappear for the winter. Digging up plants when you cannot see the leaves is a dangerous business, as a Mr G. Prescott of Bristol found out in 1837, when he had Monkshood roots for tea instead of Horseradish. His wife ate little of the offending plant and survived, but evidently Mr Prescott quite liked it and did not. I have placed Horseradish in September, as this is when the root is large and the leaves still visible. October is just as good, as is any time when the leaves are available for a definite identification, but by November they are gone. Mr Prescott's putative Horseradish may well have been in leaf and he a terrible botanist, but his deadly mistake is much more likely for anyone digging up roots that have lost their leaves.

Juniper *Juniperus communis*
CUPRESSACEAE

Many of the plants in this book have a preference for the southern realms of Britain, so it is good to have one that is found mostly in the north, particularly upland Cumbria, Northumberland and Scotland. In Wales it is confined to the far north-west and the Gower Peninsula. Rather strangely, however, it grows perfectly well in the rest of England if given the chance, and there are populations on the chalk downlands of the South and North Downs and the Chiltern Hills, and on the downs of Wiltshire and limestone hills of Gloucestershire. These are nearly always herb-rich grasslands, and most such habitats have been lost as a result of over-enthusiastic agricultural practices.

Habitat loss is the main cause of the demise of the English Juniper, but it hardly helps itself by being dioecious (separate male and female plants), leaving any isolated trees as unproductive virgins, and even fertilised females bear berries with a viability rate of less than 2 per cent. It also needs open and undisturbed ground in which to spread, and, as a pioneer plant, it encourages its own loss of habitat by establishing shelter for other trees, which eventually supplant it.

It is a great pity that most of our Junipers have gone, even in the north. It is an attractive, sprawling shrub, sometimes forming a small tree. Juniper is a rich habitat in itself, with around fifty dependent insects, including the Juniper shield bug, the Juniper aphid and the Juniper carpet moth. Over forty species of fungi are associated with Juniper, including the extraordinary *Gymnosporangium clavariiforme*, which in one of its incarnations (it has another part of its life cycle on Hawthorn) takes the form of long, clustered, jelly-like orange tongues. The Juniper is now a cause for concern, and efforts have been made to reverse its fortunes with the implementation of a biodiversity action plan.

Juniper is unmistakable when close by, but easily mistaken from a distance for gorse or a diminutive Yew. The needles are flat and very sharp, and the female plants will usually have Juniper berries at some stage of growth, making your identification certain. The ‘berries’ are really cones, like those of the Pine, and take two years to ripen from their initially green state. The green berries are edible too, and quite pleasant and soft.

I cook a lot with Juniper – a toffee flavoured with the berries is quite wonderful, for example – but what of its most famous use: gin? Gin is,

effectively, vodka that has been infused with Juniper and a variety of other plants, then distilled. Home distillation is looked on by the authorities with a dark, dark eye and even re-distilling something on which you have already paid the duty is, as far as I can tell, illegal. Fine details of illegality are as nothing to my friend Terry, who does just that and has made his own gin from (bought) Juniper berries and anything he forages that he thinks might help. If memory serves me correctly, he uses an electric 'water purifier' he bought online.

Meadow Puffball *Lycoperdon pratense* and allies

AGARICACEAE • SPORES BROWN

The Meadow Puffball is not a fungus one would necessarily search for, but rather one that is encountered while looking for other grassland species, such as the Parasol or the Field Mushroom. It is good to eat, if a little soft, and with the added small problem of you needing to peel it. But it is common in grassland, and both its Latin and its common name reflect its habitat, '*pratense*' meaning 'of the meadow'. Its old name, *Vascellum pratense*, means 'little vase that lives in a meadow', expanding its descriptive efforts with a reference to the small, brown, cup-shaped structure left behind once all the spores have dispersed.

It is distinctive among other species in never being completely round, having a more oval shape when seen from above, and in having a slight peach blush to the otherwise white skin when young. Like all puffballs, it can be eaten only when perfectly white throughout, and without the yellows, greens and browns of a maturing specimen. This species generally displays approaching maturity by a discoloration of the skin, and a knife cut to expose the flesh will confirm or deny its edibility.

Stump Puffball

There are about twenty puffball species in Britain, all of them edible – or at least, none of them poisonous. Besides the Common, the Giant and the Meadow Puffballs, the only other species I would recommend, and then with little enthusiasm, are the Pestle Puffball, *Handkea excipuliformis*, which has brown skin even when young, and the Stump Puffball, *L. pyriforme*, which is the only puffball found on dead tree stumps. The former is a large fungus with a shape that always invites comment. The latter is tiny, but slightly makes up for this by being very common and growing in dense clumps. The flavour and texture of this species are good, but there is a great deal of peeling to be done.

It is worth mentioning the Mosaic Puffball, *Lycoperdon utriformis*, which is sometimes assumed to be a failed Giant Puffball. However, it is the same pestle shape as most others in the genus, not round, and has a grey skin covered in scales which form a 'mosaic' pattern. It is very large, at sometimes 15 cm across and 25 to 28 cm tall. Although I see this species quite often in my travels, it is an indicator species of good permanent grassland. Should you find a large crop of these, they are worth trying, but pick a small, firm one. Finally, do beware of earthballs, which are described on p. 353.

The Miller *Clitopilus prunulus*

ENTOLOMATACE AE • SPORES PINK

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

There are a handful of mushrooms in this book (and out of it) for which a certain amount of courage is needed before I put them in the frying pan. Courage may be a necessity, but it is really experience that is essential. Being a cautious type (and thus a survivor), it is sometimes decades before I take the plunge. The Miller looks very much like the poisonous Fool's Funnel: both are small (up to 5 cm in diameter), both possess frosted white caps and gills that are cream-coloured in young specimens and run down the stem, and both smell farinaceous (like raw pastry).

Differentiation between the two is easy, but not to be taken lightly. The knockdown characteristic is spore colour – pale pink in the Miller, white in the Fool's Funnel. More subtle differences are that the cap of the former is all white, while the latter is frequently crazed and patchy with a dirty pink. The Miller also has a much stronger smell. The Fool's Funnel grows in grasslands while the Miller occurs in woodland, though often and unhelpfully in grassy clearings in woodland. Still not sure? Look at the spores under a microscope; those of the Miller will be finally warty, while those of the Fool's Funnel will be smooth. I expressed my opinion on studying your dinner under a microscope before eating it on p. 163, but maybe this time it is worth it.

So, is the Miller worth all this effort and *Angst*? Yes, it is one of my favourites, with a rich flavour and in my top-ten list of best mushrooms. It is worth knowing for one further reason – it has an association with the

Penny Bun. The Miller appears to parasitise the mycelium of the Penny Bun and, for some reason, fruits at the same time or just before, hence its occasional name ‘Herald of the Cep’. Should you see what you hope is a Miller, check around the area for Penny Buns. This trick works more than half of the time and is well worth knowing.

Ochre Brittlegill *Russula ochroleuca*

RUSSULACEAE • SPORES WHITE TO PALE CREAM

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

It is often the case that this particular Brittlegill is more common in a forest than all the others put together. This would be great if it tasted a bit better, but it is a little bitter and not quite so superbly nutty as some of its brethren. Slugs do not worry about such niceties, so even if there are hundreds, it can be hard to find any that are completely intact. Pick the young ones, which are firm and less likely to be part-nibbled.

Their firm texture makes them suitable for salads, though they are pleasant enough when lightly fried in butter (what isn't?). Their appearance is variable, but in general, the cap is ochre yellow and the rest of the mushroom white. It can be confused with the Yellow Swamp Brittlegill (p. 307), which actually tastes better, or a handful of yellow Brittlegills, the most common of which is the Geranium-Scented Brittlegill *R. fellea*. This has a warmer colour to its cap, and gills that are a paler version of the cap colour. It also smells of geraniums! It is considered to be inedible and probably poisonous, due to its very hot taste.

Orange Birch Bolete *Leccinum scabrum* and allies

BOLETACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The Orange Birch Bolete is less common than its brown companion. It is also very different in texture, being considerably firmer. It has a matt orange cap, and pores that are grey/brown when mature and white when very young. The stem is similarly long and cylindrical, and covered with black dots longitudinally arranged. The base of the stem is often discoloured black. The flesh is white when freshly cut, turning grey then blackish violet.

There is nothing unpleasant with which it could be easily confused, but there is the Orange Oak Bolete, *Leccinum aurantiacum*, distinguished reliably by habitat and the dots on the stem being reddish brown. It too is edible, better even, and not particularly rare. However, it is a fungus of mature and generally important woodlands and should be collected seldom or not at all.

The cap of both species is very firm and fleshy, and so requires a fairly long time in the pan. Undercooked, they can cause stomach aches. The flesh will turn black on cutting and cooking, something that can be quite startling the first time you see it. The stem is also firm, but fibrous as well and difficult to make palatable, although its flavour is good. I suggest that you always dry and powder this part.

Orange Oak Bolete

Saffron Milkcap *Lactarius deliciosus* and **False Saffron Milkcap** *Lactarius deterrimus*

RUSSULACEAE • SPORES BOTH PALE OCHRE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

These two very common fungi were once considered to be the same species, *Lactarius deliciosus*, but in 1968 it was split into two, with those growing in Spruce woods acquiring the name *L. deterrimus* and with *L. deliciosus* retained for those growing in Pine. '*Deliciosus*' is a clear indication of the mushroom's qualities. A fresco discovered in Pompeii depicts a collection of Saffron Milkcaps, with dead thrushes on the shelf below, clearly also on the menu. The Saffron Milkcap's greatest acclaim comes from no less a notable than Sir James Edward Smith, the founder of the Linnean Society, who describes it as 'the most delicious mushroom known'. I consider both its name and reputation to be at least a little overstated, but it is a good mushroom to eat, its taste halfway between a

mushroom and a carrot. The False Saffron Milkcap fares not so well, as '*deterrimus*' means 'poor' – also an overstatement, as it is merely a touch bitter.

The bright orange and the verdigris discoloration of damaged or mature specimens make both species simple to identify, and they may be differentiated from each other by habitat. The False Saffron Milkcap also tends to have more verdigris about it. The whole young specimens are orange, with distinct banding of dark and pale orange on the cap. It is crucial to note that the gills too are bright orange and they are decurrent. The taste of the flesh is mild, or slightly bitter. The stem of the Saffron Milkcap is pockmarked with paler orange patches. As with all milkcaps, they produce a latex. Unusually, it is bright orange. It is very sparse if you simply break the gills, especially in dry conditions, but once cut in half will reveal the latex. This will slowly turn an off-putting verdigris colour. If, at some point, you see red as well, your specimen is *L. semisanguifluous* ('half flowing with blood'), a species too bitter to eat. Again, I may have

discouraged you with too much information, but both Saffron Milkcaps are readily and safely identified, and are common species of plantations.

If there is a problem with these species, it is maggots. Sometimes the fungi are invertebrate-free, but often they seem to be constructed around a mushroom-shaped colony of maggots, with only the firm outside flesh intact. Even very young specimens are frequently infested. We all have our personal maggot-to-mushroom tolerance ratio, and mine is pretty relaxed, but 50:50 is too much.

Both species are at their best when young, a good size being 7.5 cm in diameter. They usually grow in troops, and sometimes hundreds can be found in a small area.

Shaggy Inkcap *Coprinus comatus*

AGARIC ACEAE • SPORES BLACK

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug **Sep** **Oct** Nov Dec

The genus *Coprinus* (the Inkcaps) was once a large and proud member of the order Agaricales. However, even at the time, mycologists had come to recognise *Coprinus* as a ‘wastebasket taxon’. This means that it was a genus into which anything that looked remotely like an Inkcap, or which at least had gills that auto-destructed into a black mess, was thrown. A serious revision was long overdue, and in 2001 the genus was split into four. Three of these four, *Coprinopsis*, *Coprinellus* and *Parasola*, were placed in a different *family*, which is like us discovering that we are actually a species of lemur. Several hundred species changed their generic names, much to the distress of field mycologists the world over. Mercifully, the Shaggy Inkcap was the first species to bear the name *Coprinus*, and under the rules of nomenclature was allowed to keep it.

The Shaggy Inkcap is a familiar, very short-lived species which grows in vast numbers on roadsides, woodland clearings, waste ground and lawns, making a black, slimy mess everywhere it finds a home. The gills auto-digest, revealing new spores. In aged specimens (which may be just three days old) only the stem, topped by a small blackened disc, will remain. No one wants to eat ink, so it is only the very young that should be collected. Young, in this instance, means that there is no sign of pink, and certainly no black, at the edge of the cap. The edge of the cap, in this case, being near the bottom of the stem. If you are unsure, cut your specimen in half lengthways to see more clearly.

Shaggy Inkcaps have the shortest shelf life of any edible fungus, to the point that a hold-up on the motorway on the return journey may spoil your dinner. This is no exaggeration, so pick them young, pick them last.

The Shaggy Inkcap was the very first wild mushroom I collected for dinner. It was a worrying time, but it is so unmistakable, with its white, cigar-on-end-shaped cap, covered with flaky scales, that my quickly scribbled last will and testament was probably an over-reaction. I have been

rather dismissive of the culinary value of this species in the past but, having tried it again, I can now say with assurance that it has a very pleasant, yes, mushroomy taste and a softly fibrous texture.

The Common Inkcap, which, annoyingly, is much less common than the Shaggy Inkcap, is worth knowing about. It has vaguely the same shape but is fatter and distinctly a brownish grey. It is edible, but only if you consume no alcohol at all for twenty-four hours either side of eating it. Since my last forty-eight-hour period on the wagon was *circa* 1959, I am unable tell you what it tastes like.

Shaggy Parasol *Chlorophyllum rhacodes*

AGARICACEAE • SPORES WHITE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The first thing to say about the Shaggy Parasol is that not everyone can eat one and go to work the next day. Some friends of mine found a collection while on holiday, sent me a photo and asked if they could eat them. I replied that yes they could, but that there was a fairly small chance they would be ill. They were both ill, embarking on a fast and furious weight-loss regime. They barely spoke to me again. Well, I did warn them. My suggestion here is to try a quarter-cap first, then a whole one the next day if all is well and proceed from there.

Unlike the Parasol, the Shaggy Parasol is a species of the woods, most often coniferous woods, though it can be found in hedges and odd corners almost anywhere. It grows in troops and rings and is common. Identification is straightforward: the cap is up to 10 cm in diameter when open, grey/brown and completely covered with unturned scales, which are darker at the lower edge. The stem sports a large, fluffy ring and, as with the Parasol, it can be slid up and down. The stem is smooth and grey. The top of the stem, the socket in which it sits and the otherwise white gills turn instantly pink on bruising. The latter characteristic is crucial and reliable, but visible only when the mushroom is fresh.

The warnings provided for the Dapperlings (p. 342) apply to the Parasol, although note that Shaggy Parasols are already quite small. Fortunately, the pink bruising gives a positive identification.

Silverweed *Potentilla anserina*

ROSACE AE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

This is related to the barren strawberry mentioned on p. 189, but is slightly more edible than its inherently disappointing cousin. Silverweed produces neither edible leaf nor fruit; it is the roots alone that are consumed. These are tiny – about the diameter of a drinking straw on a good day, though sometimes with fatter nodules at various intervals along their length. Fortunately, each plant produces several such roots.

Silverweed is obvious from its feather-like leaves, which are dark green on top and silvery white underneath. The flowers are buttercup yellow with, usually, five petals. It is a very common plant on sandy or gravelly soils and found throughout lowland Britain.

Uprooting them may well be a garden task for you, as gardens are one of its favourite habitats. So, instead of consigning them to the compost heap, cut off the leaves and scrub the stems with a nail brush against a wooden board. They may be fried or boiled, but a good alternative is to dry and powder them to produce a flour. This has been used to make pancakes or similar delicacies, or for some sorts of unleavened bread.

These roots, back-breakingly hard as they are to collect in great quantity, have proved to be saviours of people who would otherwise have starved, so do not dismiss this little plant. Better still, it tastes very good and is one of the few readily available wild plants to produce palatable starch.

Trooping Funnel *Clitocybe geotropa*

TRICHOLOMATACEAE • SPORES WHITE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug **Sep Oct** Nov Dec

The ‘Funnels’ are species in and around the genus *Clitocybe*. Few are edible, most are not worth eating and one or two are poisonous to the point of being deadly. Fortunately, the Trooping Funnel is one of the most distinct mushrooms to grow in this country. It grows in troops, often on a grassy roadside, and has a machine-made look about it: the young to medium-sized specimens appear to have been carefully crafted by a master turner. They are white/grey, tall, on very long but robust stems, and have a perfect

inverted-cone shaped cap, often with a central boss, the gills running slightly down the stem.

The Funnels are related to the Blewits, and the latter are sometimes put in the same genus, *Clitocybe*, instead of *Lepista*, where I have placed them. This close relationship is reflected in the flavour, which is slightly floral on top of the generally mushroomy taste. The texture of the Trooping Funnel is much more robust, and this must be reflected in gentler and longer cooking,

whether this be in the frying pan or in a stew. It is a common species of wood and parkland.

Trumpet Chanterelle *Cantharellus tubaeformis*

CANTHARELLACEAE • SPORES WHITE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The Trumpet Chanterelle is sometimes known as the Winter Chanterelle and can indeed be found into January, but, since it is a species that can frequently be found from August onwards and starts to look a bit wan by November, it is something of a misnomer. In addition, the specific epithet *tubaeformis* means ‘trumpet-shaped’, so I consider Trumpet Chanterelle to be a clear winner in any dispute over common nomenclature.

There you are, standing in a Beech wood, or a Pine forest, or a Spruce plantation, with little to show for your mushroom-hunting efforts. You

contemplate the prospect of going home with an empty basket. Then you look down at your feet and notice something brown, wrinkly and round. It is a Trumpet Chanterelle. Excited, you look harder and find there are five near to it, then more to the right. Soon, you will be on hands and knees finding hundreds of them.

This is a common experience, one I must have enjoyed a hundred times or more. The Trumpet Chanterelle is one of the most giving of all the mushrooms, and baskets can be filled in no time. Like most mushrooms, it is a perennial species, and once you have found a place where they grow it is possible to go back year after year. The same spot can produce fruiting bodies for three months or more, as they do not all spring up at once. The individuals are long-lived, and it is worth leaving the smaller specimens for a second visit a week or two later. Like all in its family, it suffers little infestation from invertebrates; no maggots, then, and even slugs find them unpalatable.

The scurfy grey/brown cap, wrinkled gill-like structures below, and the long, slender yellow or brown stem make it easy to identify, though it is highly variable, with a palate of colour variations to contend with. There is nothing dangerous with which it could be easily mistaken, but several related species do look like it, as one might expect. All of these are edible, but they are relatively rare and best avoided. One I find fairly frequently is a tiny, uniformly grey, clustered species called the Sinuous Chanterelle, *Pseudocraterellus undulatus*.

The flavour of the Trumpet Chanterelle is milder than that of its better-known relative the Chanterelle, but still good. It dries very quickly and well, but does not reconstitute with any of its structure intact, hence it is best powdered after drying.

Wild Plum *Prunus domestica* and allies

ROSACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The ancestry of the Plum and its subspecies is not entirely understood or – should I say? – not entirely agreed on. All the subspecies (which, by definition, includes the Plum itself) come in varieties, which does not help

at all. It is generally agreed that the domestic Plum is a product of cultivation, but with various possible histories such as it being a hybrid between a Blackthorn and two Cherry Plums. The result of this is a polyploid species with three sets of chromosomes. Another possibility is that all of the chromosomes came from Cherry Plums. As with all such confusions, the forager takes the practical approach and puts edibility and palatability above taxonomic niceties.

The Wild Plum is an escapee from cultivation, found in hedgerows, rough ground and woodland edges. It is fairly common throughout lowland Britain, particularly the Midlands, though less common in Scotland. The fruit is reasonably large and reliably sweet and fruity. If it is small but still

distinctly oval, then it will be a Wild Damson, a very common subspecies in some parts of Britain.

The Bullace too is a subspecies of the Wild Plum. It is a small, round Plum but looks more like a large Sloe. It is distinguished from the Sloe by being sweet and the shrub on which it grows being mostly without thorns. It can hybridise with Blackthorn, which explains the few occasions when no amount of tasting and looking could help me decide which species it was.

There is no need for me to tell you what to do with any Plum species, but do remember to make some Damson or Bullace gin.

Bullace

Wood Mushroom *Agaricus sylvicola*

AGARICACEAE • SPORES DARK BROWN

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug **Sep Oct** Nov Dec

The Wood Mushroom is effectively a smaller, woodland, Horse Mushroom in appearance, and they are in fact closely related species. The Wood Mushroom is usually taller and generally more slender, and with a distinctly bulbous base to the stem. It shares the Horse Mushroom's pendulous ring on the stem, complete with the cogwheel ornamentation. It also smells strongly of aniseed and has a habit of turning a progressively strong yellow with age and with bruising. This will worry any who have encountered or

heard of the Yellow Stainer (p. 349), but this turns *instantly* yellow on bruising.

Wood Mushrooms are never found in grasslands, only in woods, though it is not fussy about which type of wood, broad-leaved or coniferous. I have never seen it growing in large numbers, which is a disappointment as it is very tasty mushroom.

Yellow Swamp Brittlegill *Russula claroflava*

RUSSULACEAE • SPORES PALE OCHRE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

The egg-yolk colour of the cap, the yellow/cream of the gills, mild, nutty taste and a habitat consisting of boggy Birch woods make the Yellow Swamp Brittlegill a very simple species to spot and to identify. More even than most Brittlegills, it suffers from slug attack, probably because its environment is permanently damp, so you may need to search around before you find many that have not been eaten already. Sometimes you will find a few that are completely intact, and a celebration is in order.

The flavour is one of the nuttiest in a generally nutty genus, and the younger, firmer specimens are best eaten raw, but after a good wash.

OCTOBER

In October the focus turns dramatically to the fungi. Many described in this chapter for the first time may have appeared earlier, but some are determinedly late species – notably the Blewits, which may wait until the end of the month or even November. I have placed Blackthorn here because the Sloes are at their best. One unquestionably October species is the Sweet Chestnut, whose nuts fall throughout the month and almost never at any other time.

Blackthorn
Blewits
Coconut-Scented Milkcap
Cow Bolete and allies
Curry Milkcap
Meadow Waxcap
Oak Moss
Scarlet Waxcap and allies
Snowy Waxcap
Sweet Chestnut

Also found

Bay Bolete
Beech (nuts)
Beefsteak Fungus
Bittercresses
Blackberry
Blusher
Blushing Wood Mushroom
Brown Birch Bolete
Burdock
Cauliflower Fungus
Chanterelle
Charcoal Burner
Chicken of the Woods
Common Puffball
Common Sorrel
Crab Apple
Dandelion (roots)
Deceivers
Dewberry and allies
Dog and Field Rose
Dulse
Fairy Ring Champignon
Field Mushroom
Garlic Mustard
Giant Puffball
Greencracked Brittlegill
Hawthorn
Hedgehog Mushrooms
Hen of the Woods
Horn of Plenty
Horse Mushroom and allies
Horseradish

Juniper
Meadow Puffball and allies
Meadowsweet
Oar Weed and allies
Ochre Brittlegill
Orange Birch Bolete and allies
Oyster Mushrooms and allies
Parasol Mushrooms
Penny Bun and allies
Rowan
Saffron Milkcaps
Scarletina Bolete
Sea Beet
Sea Buckthorn
Shaggy Inkcap
Shaggy Parasol
Silverweed
Stinging Nettle (regrowth and seeds)
Sweet Gale
Tawny Grisette and allies
The Miller
The Prince
Trooping Funnel
Trumpet Chanterelle
Wood Ear
Wood Mushroom
Wood Sorrel
Yarrow
Yellow Swamp Brittlegill

Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*

ROSACEAE

The magnificent Blackthorn, famous for supplying the magnificent sloe, is found throughout lowland Britain, though a little less common in Scotland. It is a familiar hedgerow tree; at least, it is a familiar tree of hedges older than 180 years or so. Although effective in a hedgerow, it is less favoured than Hawthorn because it spreads very rapidly into the fields via suckers. It can also be found at the edges of woods and will easily fill an area of wasteland such as a disused railway line. Sometimes entire thickets of Blackthorn can be found.

Blackthorn flowers early in the year, before its leaves start to form. This is a dicey strategy as rain and seriously cold weather can affect pollination. It is thus largely the weather of March and April that determines the size of the Sloe crop. A good year will result in much cheer and the swapping of sloe gin recipes, while a bad year for sloes will be a cause of much grumbling. The only way to pass peaceably over the famine years is to pick as much as you can, when you can, and make gallons of the hard stuff.

The Blackthorn tree is distinctive, with its almost black branches. These are used to make walking sticks, and I am very proud of a particularly lethal-looking shillelagh I made with one a few years ago. The branches wield long, straight thorns that compound their malice by introducing bacteria into any wound they create. It is not called the ‘spiny plum’ (*Prunus spinosa*) for nothing. The leaves are small, pointed at both ends, at their widest two-thirds of the way from the stem and finely serrated. The berries look like tiny, round Plums with fairly thin flesh around a fat stone. The flesh is notoriously tart and astringent, its tannin component binding the proteins in saliva. I have learned to enjoy ripe sloes, finding them a refreshing snack on a walk, and small children, not yet corrupted by exposure to our generally bland food, will eat them with equanimity while their parents invariably screw up their faces in disgust. Sloe stones have been dug up at many prehistoric sites, so evidently our ancestors were as children when it came to sloe-eating.

The sloe has only one lookalike – the related Bullace. This too is edible and even makes a good fruit gin, so it is no problem. Bullaces are larger and considerably sweeter, but what will give the game away is that the shrub on which they grow has almost no spines. (See p. 306 for more about the Bullace.)

While sloe wine is a possibility and one can, with a bit of effort, use them in a fruit leather, it is sloe gin for which the berries are picked. I have written much about this blessed liquor, and my advice is to pick the berries whenever they are ripe – which may be from late August until late November – and not to bother with frosts, putting them in a freezer before use or pricking them, as some people suggest. The key is to leave them in the gin for at least six months. This extracts the most flavour, and particularly the amaretto flavour (an organic compound of cyanide)

contained in the pip at the centre of the stone. Then keep it for a year or two more before drinking, though ten to twenty years is better. Sloe by name, slow by nature.

Patience is no longer a valued part of life, so I have a quick fix for you; in fact, I have quick-sloe gin. This is called épine, the French word for ‘spine’. It is made not from the fruit but from the leaves of the Blackthorn. Blackthorns produce long, thin, spineless side-branches every year. When they are fully mature – late May to midsummer – strip off the leaves. For 500 g of leaves, add 500 g of sugar, three-quarters of a pint (0.4 l) of brandy and five pints (2.8 l) of red wine. Ideally the latter should be Elderberry, Blackberry, Plum or, best of all, Cherry wine that you have made yourself. Decant after three weeks, though three months or even three years (I forgot about it once) will only improve matters. À votre santé!

Coconut-Scented Milkcap *Russula glyciosimus*

RUSSULACEAE • SPORES WHITE TO PALE CREAM

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

This is one of a handful of mushrooms that can be identified from their smell alone. The coconut aroma is evident in fresh specimens but gets stronger with drying. The Latin name means ‘smelling sweet’, which quite nicely describes the coconut. I do not think it would make a particularly enticing Mango and Coconut-Scented Milkcap Sundae or anything much else for which coconut is a customary ingredient. However, it goes neatly with its sister species the Curry Milkcap in any curry that requires coconut. What it is not is something one would eat a complete dish of, as it is only considered to be ‘semi-edible’. A bit like chilli peppers.

It is a small species, seldom more than a few centimetres across. The cap is flat to slightly depressed in the centre, pale, concentrically zoned and various shades of greyish lilac and buff. The stem is paler than the cap and the gills a pale buff. It almost invariably grows with Birch.

Cow Bolete *Suillus bovinus* and allies

BOLETACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

I find a huge number of Cow Boletes every year, and wish I did not. They are mushy and tasteless, though still edible. It is a famine food, for which only a famished man would give thanks. Nevertheless, it is still nutritious and worth trying as a mushroom with an amusing trick up its tubes. The flesh turns from pale yellow to a startling purple as soon as it is heated on the stove.

It is a mushroom that often forms dense ‘colonies’, always under Pines, and is straightforward to identify. The cap is an orange/brown with a hint of

pink, soft and slightly sticky. The tubes are fairly bright yellow when young, turning darker and with a hint of green, then brown, as the spores mature. The stem is narrow, cylindrical and about the same colour as the cap. Incidentally, the Latin name is distinctly odd, as *Suillus bovinus* means ‘pig cow’.

Cow Bolete. Fine specimens but the white cap edge is seen only occasionally.

Slippery Jack

The Weeping Bolete, *Suillus granulatus*, is very similar in appearance (and, unfortunately, flavour) and also grows with Pines. It is more substantial, the cap darker and the tubes and stem lighter. At the top of the stem small 'granules' can be found: hence its Latin name. In wet weather droplets form on the tubes: hence its common name.

There are several more *Suillus* species, few of them particularly welcome in the kitchen, but Slippery Jack, *S. luteus*, is just about worth mentioning because it is so common, and a little firmer than the others. The Velvet Bolete, *S. variegatus*, is very common in Pine woods and also relatively firm in texture. Slippery Jack, and a fifth species, the Larch Bolete, *S. grevellei*, are unlike the other three species because they have a very pronounced white membrane covering the tubes, which forms a ring on the stem as the cap grows. Both have an impressively sticky/slimy and rubbery skin on the cap, which can and must be removed before cooking. Failure to remove the skin will result in a cure for constipation if you suffer from it and all hell let loose if you don't.

The most interesting thing about members of the genus *Suillus* is clearly not their comestible potential; it is an unusual association in which each species is paired with one member of the genus *Chroogomphus* or *Gomphidius*. These latter genera (and you will have to try to keep up at this point) are related to each other and, remarkably, in the same sub-order as the genus *Suillus* – the Suillaceae. It is thought that the non-*Suillus* species member of the pairing parasitises the mycelium of the *Suillus* species. My hypothesis is that the great-grandfather of *Suillus* acquired a parasite, then split into several species, and the parasite evolved with it into the current species. *Suillus bovinus* has a particularly pretty parasitic fungus, *Chroogomphus roseus*. It is a fashionable pink and grey.

Incidentally, all of the parasites are believed to be edible, and I have tried a couple of them. Unsurprisingly, like *Suillus*, they are tasteless.

Curry Milkcap *Russula camphoratus*

RUSSULACEAE • SPORES CREAM

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

A walk among broad-leaved trees in the autumn will find many species of small brown mushrooms, most of which can only be identified by an expert or someone with a microscope, lots of books and plenty of time on their hands. Few of them are edible apart from the Deceiver (p. 270), but another, the Curry Milkcap, is sufficiently common and interesting to warrant the attention of the forager.

This mushroom usually grows in small troops, is orange/brown on top, has paler, closely spaced gills, produces little of its somewhat watery ‘milk’ and has a purple cast to the stem. It also has a trick that is difficult to notice on fresh specimens but highly conspicuous when dried: it smells of curry. This characteristic is enough to give you a firm identification in the dark, so provided you find a small, orange milkcap with a purple stem that smells of curry, a Curry Milkcap is most certainly what it will be.

The smell intensifies strongly when the mushroom is dried. So always dry your crop and keep the intact fruit bodies in labelled jars for use throughout the year. If you need the quintessential flavour of curry, then this is an unusual but natural way of obtaining it. It does not have any chilli heat, so that will have to be added. Along with its sister species the Coconut-Scented Milkcap, the Curry Milkcap can only be eaten in small quantities.

Field Blewit *Lepista saeva* and **Wood Blewit** *Lepista nuda*

TRICHOLOMATACEAE • SPORES BOTH PALE PINK

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

I am frequently asked which mushroom is my favourite to eat; my response is always ‘The Blewits’. Their flavour is, of course, mushroomy, but there is a fragrance to them found nowhere else in the world of culinary mushrooms. The texture is unusual too and resists any encouraging attempt at a description. Sticky, slimy and slippery does not sound remotely appetising, but I promise that in the case of Blewits it is. Garlic, cream and toast are words I always associate with these species.

Field Blewit

Both species generally appear late in the season, from the third week of October onwards, though I have found Wood Blewits in Scotland in the last week of September, and the only mushroom ever bold enough to appear in my garden was a Wood Blewit in June, a full six months out of season. Field Blewits often continue deep into winter, even surviving all but the hardest of January frosts. This species was sold at market in the Midlands and the north, and sent to Covent Garden. From mid-October to late

November, Pooles, a grocer in Gloucester, used to offer the enterprising forager 6d. a pound for them in 1942, rising to 9d. in the 1950s, the latter equating to a healthy £7.60 per kilo in modern terms.

Wood Blewits have found a second occupation as a dyer of wool. The resultant colour, of course, is green.

Their common names are accurate indicators of habitat, except that Wood Blewits are also occasionally found in permanent pasture, usually in impressive rings. Field Blewits also grow in rings, but only where you would expect them. Wood Blewits are the more common of the two but unreliable, sometimes only appearing for a season or two in leaf litter, never to return. Field Blewits are slightly less common in the south of Britain.

With their intense lilac colours Wood and Field Blewits are beautiful fungi, especially when young. The former has a damp, shiny, brown top, flushed with lilac when young and strikingly lilac everywhere else, in young specimens at least. The Field Blewit is creamy white all over, again feeling damp and with that same lilac found only on the short, robust and fibrous stem.

There is little to confuse them with, except that the Wood Blewit is superficially like one or two species of lilac/purple Webcap (see p. 339). The most likely confusion comes from *Cortinarius purpurascens*. It too has a purple/brown cap and purple stem and gills, but is easily distinguished by its swollen stem base and the rust-coloured spores that discolour the gills. This is not a poisonous species, and I did eat one once. It tasted unpleasantly and discouragingly of cyanide, but I was fine. However, Webcaps are a no-go area for the forager, as several of them are deadly.

There are a few less frequent but related edible species, including *Lepista sordida*. Looking like a smaller and more slender Wood Blewit, it grows in dense tufts. There is also *Lepista paneolus* (formerly *L. luscina*), which lacks any lilac colours and has pockmarks on the pale grey/brown cap. It grows in impressive rings, with individuals crowded and overlapping.

Wood Blewit

Meadow Waxcap *Cuphophyllus pratensis*

HYGROPHORACEAE • SPORES WHITE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

About 3 km from my west Dorset home are the lovely Kingcombe Meadows. I have run mushroom and hedge-row forays there for a quarter of a century, having taken over this pleasant duty from my much lamented predecessor, John Keylock. Even when not ‘working’ I take every opportunity to visit its vast, ancient hedges and immaculate grasslands. Many rare fungi have been found there, but it is particularly well known for its waxcaps. Thirty-two of the sixty or so British species have been found at Kingcombe.

The trust that owns it gets a little touchy about me picking anything to eat, and I appreciate and cheerfully accommodate their concern. However, even the trust must admit that some species are so common, there and elsewhere, that taking a few for a fryup could not conceivably damage their future. One is the Snowy Waxcap (p. 324); another is the Meadow Waxcap.

The latter is one of the larger waxcaps, at up to 10 cm in diameter. The cap is a pretty, pale orange and dry to the touch and in appearance. The gills and stem are an even paler orange, and the gills run down the stem. Like all of the waxcaps, it grows in rings in well-established grasslands, usually with moss.

It has a mild flavour and is a little watery, but it is pleasant enough. The waxcaps are well known for being latecomers, seldom appearing before the middle of October, and most common later in that month and throughout November, hard frosts permitting. A mild, wet spell may result in a second fruiting.

Oak Moss *Evernia prunastri*

PARMELIACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

Despite its unequivocal name, Oak Moss is most definitely a lichen. And despite my providing an accepted Latin name, in truth lichens do not possess them, but rather assume the name of the fungus that is the structural part. Lichens are composite organisms formed from a fungus plus either an algae or a cyanobacterium, which are photosynthetic and provide the lichen with its colour. Of course, the latter two will also have Latin names, which is why the lichen as a whole cannot have one.

Oak Moss is the only lichen in this book, but it is a very common one and very interesting. Since lichens are mostly fungi, they have food value and can taste a little mushroomy. But with Oak Moss it is the aroma that emanates from it when it is heated that is prized. The first time I tried it, I could only taste that mushroom flavour, but when I returned, disappointed, to my loft/office, I was assailed by a powerful and attractive smell that lingered for hours. I have heated Oak Moss in the presence of many people over the years and always ask what they can smell. They come up with endless ideas, but I firmly defend my own interpretation – it smells like the department store Debenhams – maybe somewhere between the café at the top and the perfume counter. This is more sensible than it may sound, as Oak Moss was once used in perfume.

Oak Moss is fairly easy to identify. It is branched, with flat lobes that are a paler green on the underside. It usually, but not exclusively, grows on Oak

and is simple to collect from the many fallen branches and twigs. Do be careful when collecting it, as many lichens are rare, and do not do what a chef friend of mine did in preparation for a very large dinner. He sent out a party of inexperienced foragers who proceeded to strip Oak trees bare of lichens. He called me over to complain that it didn't smell right at all. I looked at the basket of lichens and found not a single specimen of Oak Moss.

I use Oak Moss along with wood chips when smoking drinks, such as sloe gin, and have an extremely Heath Robinson arrangement of camping kettle, pipe, puffer and stove for this slightly unnerving task. Oak Moss dries very well and will need to be subsequently powdered or lightly chopped like a herb to be used in cooking. The powder can be used mixed with a breadcrumb coating. Unfortunately it is only the kitchen that will take on the fragrance and not the food. More reliable is to mix it in with anything that needs to be fried.

Oak Moss is around all year, but I have placed it in October because that is when you will be wandering around woods looking for mushrooms.

Scarlet Waxcap *Hygrocybe coccinea* and allies

HYGROPHORACEAE • SPORES WHITE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep **Oct** Nov Dec

I have always been surprised by how few people have even noticed this mushroom. While individually they are fairly small, at around 5 cm in diameter, they do grow in large rings and are a brilliant, brilliant scarlet. Red mushrooms, when they are noticed, are seldom considered good for the pot or the stomach and are passed by with merely an admiring glance. However, the Scarlet Waxcap is good to eat, if not the best, and completely harmless. It is especially worth collecting if you are holding a dinner party and wish to terrify your guests. If they ask if you know for sure that it is edible, just say that you don't but you thought it looked pretty.

While no harm will come to you if you pick any of the other red waxcaps, some of these are rare and need to be avoided. Accurate identification, therefore, is still needed. The cap is dry, and scarlet (not orange) when young, but displaying pale patches with age. The stem is dry, scarlet at the top, becoming more orange/yellow towards the base. The gills are a rather variable orange, with a paler edge.

The flavour, as noted, is mild and the texture soft. A very quick and gentle sauté is all that is needed. If much water runs out into the pan, then remove the mushrooms and reduce the liquor until you have only oil or butter left, then return the waxcaps for a final, quick, fry.

One more species is worth a mention: the Crimson Waxcap, *Hygrocybe punicea*. It is the largest of our waxcaps, at up to 10 cm in diameter, and a splendid sight. While not particularly rare, it seems a great pity to pick this beautiful mushroom for the table. There is a further problem in that it can easily be confused with the much less common and equally beautiful Splendid Waxcap, *Hygrocybe splendissima*. Fortunately, the Crimson Waxcap will not be a great temptation to the epicurean as the flavour is almost nonexistent and the texture watery.

Snowy Waxcap *Cuphophyllus virgineus*

HYGROPHOR ACEAE • SPORES WHITE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

This tiny mushroom is a real beauty, but it looks neither edible nor remotely tasty. Yet it is perfectly safe and full of flavour. There are around sixty waxcap species in Britain, of which only a handful are worth eating. The rest are too small, too slimy, utterly tasteless, too rare or simply too beautiful to collect. The Snowy Waxcap is one of the commonest of its tribe, and large, densely filled rings of it can be found frequently in long-established, and generally rather mossy, grassland. Waxcaps are considered to be indicator species of good (species-rich) grassland, and having any more than ten species in field or even a lawn will make it a national treasure.

If waxcaps have a problem, it is their Latin names – they change all the time. This occurs for several reasons – rediscovered, older names will take official priority over newer names, for example – but with the waxcaps it is the splitting of what was once the genus *Hygrocybe* into several new genera, though *Hygrocybe* has been retained for most species. So, the last time I wrote about the Snowy Waxcap it was called *Hygrocybe virginea*, but it has borne fifty or more other names at one time or other. In fact, I have short-changed you: its current full name is *Cuphophyllus virgineus var. virgineus*.

The Snowy Waxcap is seldom more than 5 cm in diameter and usually only 2.5 cm. Unlike many waxcaps, all the surfaces are dry to the touch. It is creamy white all over, though the colour is quite variable, with darker specimens probably being different varieties. The gills are thick and run down the stem. Only one waxcap is similar in appearance to the Snowy Waxcap, the Cedarwood Waxcap, *Hygrocybe russocoriacea*. I have found this on a few occasions only, but it is very distinct in its strong smell of pencils! You should, therefore, always take a sniff when picking Snowy Waxcaps. Finally, beware of picking small mushrooms from field or wood. It is easy to get carried away and pick everything in sight, but there may well be vague lookalikes in the basket by the end of the day. Although

different in so many ways, the Fool's Funnel, *Clitocybe rivulosa* (see p. 345), is similar in size and also more or less white. And it is poisonous.

Sweet Chestnut *Castanea sativa*

FAGACEAE

Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep **Oct** Nov Dec

The Sweet Chestnut is a stately and magnificent tree, but in Britain its nuts seldom reach the size of their cousins from warmer climes such as Italy and Croatia. Most years they are rather pathetic attempts, but every five or so years the weather is just right and decent-sized nuts appear in vast numbers. Even then not every tree will produce anything edible, and a certain amount of walking and searching will be required to find a productive tree. I always combine my chestnut hunts with mushroom hunts, filling pockets, hats and mushroom baskets if things are going well. Sweet Chestnut trees are common throughout lowland Britain, though more so south of Hull, and, the further north you venture, the smaller the nuts will be.

Nut drop takes place over an approximately two-week period, usually in the middle of October. Some cupules (the technical term for the spiny casing) fall early, but these will be empty, shed by the tree as failures not worth further investment. Most of the cupules will open after they have fallen, and those that have not must be ground with a boot where they lie until they split. When gathering the nuts, gardening gloves are essential as the cupules have ferociously sharp spines. It is worth taking a look at your nuts at this point; rather surprisingly, they are hairy!

Chestnuts will survive for a while in good condition and even improve a little, due to their starch being converted into sugar, but using or preparing them in some way is best done within a week or two. The worst thing by far about Sweet Chestnuts is removing the skin. The skin of young nuts is easier to peel, though still not *that* easy. The method most likely to work is to cut a cross in the bottom (non-shiny) rounded end and part-cook the nuts by boiling them for eight minutes. Remove from the pan and peel, starting with the cut base. Usually, the inner skin will come away with the shell, but if not, then return the partially peeled nut to the boiling water for another two minutes. They will need a little more cooking to make them soft and sweet. Of course, if ‘chestnuts roasting on an open fire’ is more to your liking, you need not bother with the boiling water.

While enormously popular on the continent, Sweet Chestnuts are little used in Britain – ‘Our prouder stomachs, in this country, have always rebelled against this delicacy’, as a nineteenth-century writer had it. Beyond the small bag at Christmas, Chestnuts are seldom on our shopping lists – or foraging lists. The easiest way to use them is, first, to make Chestnut flour, an ingredient of which I am a great advocate. It can be employed to thicken a roux, make breads and cakes richer, and to make pancakes. It can be bought ready-made, of course, but it is interesting to make some from wild nuts. It is hard work, however, taking two or three hours to make enough to fill a large jam jar. Roughly chop the peeled nuts and dry them in a low oven. Put them in a serious blender, sieve out the flour and return any un-blitzed pieces to the blender for another try. Dry your flour further, spread in baking tins in a low oven and then seal in jars.

NOVEMBER

November is an excellent time to forage, with many fungi continuing to appear and a few, such as the Blewits and Waxcaps, making their first appearance if the autumn rains are late or poor. Sloes, haws, rosehips and even Crab Apples can still be found; indeed, some people will not collect their sloes until after the first hard frost. However, no species first appears or is consistently at its best in November. For this reason there are no species descriptions in this chapter, or in the December chapter, just lists and references to the species descriptions.

I am very fond of November, and continue to take my mushroom forays in the south of England up to the end of the first week. After that (and indeed, often before, especially in the north) hard frosts are likely to appear, destroying most fruiting bodies. Earlier frosts will kill field fungi, but woodland fungi are protected by the leaf canopy. By the second week of November the leaves will have fallen in deciduous forests, leaving the fungi unprotected and also, rather obviously, covered in a layer of leaf litter. There is little point in fungi attempting to distribute spores from underneath a pile of leaves, so most fungi simply stop producing mushrooms. A notable exception is the large Wood Blewit, which is sometimes at its best in November and is a late treat.

Coniferous forests will still be good places to forage as there is little leaf fall and frost protection is mostly maintained. Chanterelles may linger here, and the related Trumpet Chanterelle can frequently be found by the hundred. The latter is sometimes known as the Winter Chanterelle for this reason.

As well as the above-mentioned fruits and fungi, some edible leaves can still be found. The lush basal rosettes of sorrel leaves are common in November fields, and woodland paths may sprout healthy specimens of Bittercresses. With the exception of Dandelions, it is not a good time to dig up any edible roots, as the leaves will have disappeared, making identification difficult and thus dangerous.

Despite its restricted palette, November is a good time to forage. What would you do on your walk otherwise?

Alexanders
Bittercresses
Black Mustard
Blackthorn
Blewits
Common Sorrel
Dandelion (roots)
Dog and Field Rose
Garlic Mustard
Hawthorn
Meadow Waxcap and allies
Oak Moss
Scarlet Waxcap and allies
Scarlet Waxcap and allies
Sea Beet
Snowy Waxcap
Trumpet Chanterelle
Wood Ear
Wood Sorrel
Yarrow

DECEMBER

As with November, in December a few fruits will linger on hedgerow trees and shrubs, plus a handful of leafy plants, happier in warmer times, and a few of the hardier fungi can still be found. But December is on the cusp of the year and also looks forward. Alexanders and Black Mustard confound normal expectations by beginning their leafy growth in December, or even in November, and can be quite lush in the depths of winter. The chive-like leaves of Wild Onion (‘Crow Garlic’) will be conspicuous and at their most palatable in the now short roadside grass. The one species of mushroom that insists on making a winter appearance, the Velvet Shank, can frequently be found in December.

Hard frosts and snow can make things difficult or even impossible, but I remember picking (well, stealing) some ornamental Crab Apples growing in a park that were covered in a thick, spiky hoar frost, so there is always something to find.

Alexanders
Bittercresses
Black Mustard
Blewits
Common Sorrel
Dandelion (roots)
Dog and Field Rose
Garlic Mustard
Oak Moss
Sea Beet
Trumpet Chanterelle
Velvet Shank
Wood Ear

POISONOUS SPECIES

A fair proportion of the natural world is out to get you, so it is good to know your enemy. Below, I describe those species which are likely to be troublesome to the forager. I have arranged them in order of importance – 'importance' here being a compromise of how much damage the species can do, how likely you are to find it or confuse it with an edible species, and family grouping. Some genera of fungi (such as the webcaps) include a few lethal species, with the rest of them of unknown toxicity or no culinary merit. Thus entire genera have been consigned to damnation. The list is by no means exhaustive: many more fungi and plants are likely to give you a few uncomfortable days off work and some can do much worse, so just because something is not described below does not necessarily mean it is safe. We think of the 'wild' as being a dangerous place, but it is in your flower garden that most perils are likely to lie. If you are considering a meal of anything in your borders, do check its toxicity first.

Note: Knowing the time of year when a dangerous species is likely to be found is helpful, but it can also be a trap. For example, disaster awaits you should you not believe that a mushroom you have found could possibly be a Death Cap simply because it was May. Fungi in particular can suddenly appear months out of season and plants will frequently make an early arrival, or a comeback, if the weather itself is unseasonal.

Instead of supplying a graphic bar suggesting the best time to find something, with the poisonous species I leave you with a more vague and expansive idea of season, such as 'Early Spring, Summer'. Even so, it is still merely a guide, and only accurate identification will protect you.

FUNGI

Death Cap *Amanita phalloides* and allies

AMANITACEAE • SPORES WHITE • LATE SUMMER, AUTUMN

For anyone intending to pick wild mushrooms the Death Cap is the one fungus with which they must be familiar. It is deadly. Even in Britain, where the picking of mushrooms has until recently been restricted to Field and Horse Mushrooms, mistakes have been made. Newspapers from the nineteenth century abound with tragic tales that, from the symptoms they describe, must be traced to this mushroom. In 1867 seven people in Chislehurst were poisoned, and a daughter of the family, Miss Annie Warton, aged seventeen, perished. In 1886 William Whitworth and his daughter died in Nottingham from mushroom poisoning, and in 1874 at Brixton Mrs Henry Eggbrecht similarly died and took her infant daughter with her, having poisoned her with breast milk. These are all terrible tragedies, and they continue still.

Two people have died from consuming Death Caps in Britain in more recent years. The first, in 2008, was a woman from the Isle of Wight who apparently mistook some for Paddy-Straw mushrooms, a common, cultivated mushroom used in her home of origin, Thailand. The second, a woman from Somerset, was tragically careless. The two shared their meal with one other person, who consumed less of the fungus. The death suffered in all cases is extremely unpleasant and prolonged. They are also, sadly, needless, as the Death Cap is readily identified.

It is a middling-sized mushroom, with a cap typically 7.5 to 12.5 cm in diameter when open. The cap is olive green, tending to olive yellow on occasions. The skin is very finely striate (innate fibres radiating from the centre outwards) and may bear the whitish remnants of the bag at the base of the stem that occasionally sticks to it as it grows. The gills are white with an occasional hint of green/yellow. The spores are white. The stem is white, but with the same olive tints a more regular feature. It may be a little scurfy and perhaps have wiggly banding marks. It will have a conspicuous and pendulous ring on the stem. This ring is grooved on the top surface.

Sometimes the ring becomes detached, so look out for it on the cap edge. The base is very swollen and with the tell-tale bag or volva from which the whole mushroom grew. Green cap, white gills, ring on stem and bag at base is really all you need to know.

One problem arises when people pick immature Death Caps, mistaking them for Field Mushrooms or similar white mushrooms, usually from a field edge where there are trees. This is because young Death Caps are covered by the white volva, though scraping it back will reveal the green coloration of the immature cap.

There is also a white form reported, though I have not once seen this particularly treacherous variety in fifty years of looking. I encounter the regular form two or three times a year, mostly under Oaks or sometimes Beech trees, and they are often found in August, and particularly September. Usually Death Caps appear in groups of half a dozen or so, but some years, as in 2016, they grow in large numbers and in previously unsuspected places.

Half a Death Cap is enough to kill you, but with a strong constitution and intensive nursing there is a good chance of survival. When a large quantity is consumed, then death is almost certain and nothing can be done for you as the toxins destroy critical cells in your body. Symptoms will appear several hours after consumption, these being gastrointestinal in nature and extremely painful. Recovery may follow after a day or so, but the toxins are in the blood now, and with the liver unable to destroy them, liver and kidney failure will ensure your demise.

There is also the Destroying Angel, *Amanita virosa*. This too does what it says on the tin, being just as poisonous as the Death Cap. It can be a statuesque mushroom, and pure white all over. The cap is very small compared with its long, upward-tapering and substantial stem. There is a white form of the False Death Cap, *A. citrina* (an inedible but not particularly poisonous lookalike). I mention it because it is very common – much more so than the Destroying Angel.

Ultimately, if you see a mushroom with a bag at the base and a pendulous ring on the stem, you must not eat it. You will regret it if you do, though not for very long.

Panther Cap *Amanita pantherina*

AMANITACEAE • SPORES WHITE • LATE SUMMER, AUTUMN

There is only one edible species with which it is possible to confuse the Panther Cap: the Blusher (p. 257). Even then, it takes either extreme bad luck or truly terrible observational skills to make the mistake. Overall, the Panther Cap is one of the neatest mushrooms in the forest. Dapper, one might say. It is generally smaller than the Blusher and perfectly symmetrical, at least when young. Apart from this, unlike the Blusher, the cap is an unchanging chocolate brown with white spots (not grey/pink), it does not bruise pink anywhere – the stem, gills and flesh always white – the base of the stem has a distinct gutter and the ring on the stem lacks any grooves.

If you do make a mistake, you will suffer muscarine poisoning. Fortunately, muscarine causes a chemical imbalance rather than going round smashing things up, as happens with the toxins in Death Caps and several other species. This means there is an antidote. It is atropine, which is, ironically, the toxin in Deadly Nightshade. Symptoms are nausea, vomiting, sweating and more. It generally stimulates secretary systems, so you leak all over the place. It is seldom deadly if treated in time.

It is worth mentioning that the Panther Cap is an uncommon mushroom of deciduous woodlands. In the same habitat, however, there is a very common species that looks almost identical to it. This is the False Panther Cap, *Amanita excelsa*. The only quick way to tell the difference between the two is to look at the ring on the stem. In the Panther Cap it has no grooves, unlike the False Panther Cap. Some people consider the latter species to be edible, but I did not get to be so old a forager by taking chances.

Fly Agaric *Amanita muscaria*

AMANITACEAE • SPORES WHITE • LATE SUMMER, AUTUMN

The Fly Agaric is *the* iconic toadstool, admired and feared alike; it graces the pages of children's books and a thousand nature calendars. What it is not, however, is deadly. It contains two chemicals that can be described as poisonous. One, muscarine, is present in relatively small quantities and causes nausea, sweating and other unpleasant symptoms. The other is ibotenic acid, which also causes nausea, as well as – and of more interest to some – changes in perception and control of the limbs. It is a psychoactive drug, and has long been used for recreational and shamanic purposes. I have never tried it – not from any moralistic standpoint but because I need to know what is going on all the time and to keep firm control of my limbs.

Although humans can consume this mushroom with little fear of fatality, dogs cannot, being very susceptible to the toxins it contains and frequently dying as a result.

There is little point in describing the Fly Agaric in great detail: it is tall, cap diameter up to 15 cm, a white, fluffy stem with a large, grooved ring, and a swollen stem. It grows with Birch and Pine, and it is a beautiful red with white spots.

Deadly Webcap *Cortinarius rubellus* and allies

CORTINARIACEAE • SPORES RUST BROWN • LATE SUMMER, AUTUMN

I find it quite extraordinary that anyone could mistake the Deadly Webcap or any of its similarly deadly sister species with anything else. The ‘anything else’ here is usually the Chanterelle or, less commonly, the Penny

Bun. It is like confusing a dog and a duck. But people are not always as carefully observant as they should be, must be, and horror ensues.

The Deadly Webcap and its allies were not recognised as possessing the ability to destroy people's kidneys until the early 1970s, previous deaths and disasters presumably being blamed on something else or remaining a mystery. Perhaps the relatively long time before symptoms appear took the eye of suspicion from them. Since then there have been a few notorious cases in Britain, and it is too much to hope that there will be no more. Fortunately, it is a relatively rare species in England, though not so in Scotland. Still, I see some of this dangerous group of fungi every year in southernmost England, sometimes growing in their hundreds in Spruce plantations.

There are hundreds of webcap species, most of which are not in this dangerous group (*Orellani*) but all of which you should avoid completely. Webcaps are fiendishly difficult to tell apart, and even mycologists with half a century's experience will dismiss them on a foray as too much trouble to identify. However, it is very easy to know that something *is* a webcap.

The generic name, *Cortinarius*, is a reference to the mass of fine blue or white fibres that radiate from the stem to the edge of the cap, a little like the membranous ring seen on other species such as *Agaricus*. *Cortina* is Latin for ‘curtain’. These fibres soon detach and all but disappear as the cap expands; however, they are visible on the stem as a few fragments and become more visible as the rusty spores discolour them. Still, it is much easier with unopened caps, so look around for a small specimen.

The rust-brown colour of the spores is a crucial determining factor of webcaps, so if in the slightest doubt, take the time to do a spore print. There are very few edible species with rust-brown spores, so dismissing any that are will keep you safe from *Cortinarius* and a few other dangerous genera.

Deadly Fibrecap *Inocybe erubescens* and allies

CORTINARIACEAE • SPORES WALNUT BROWN • SUMMER

I cannot imagine anyone collecting fibrecaps by mistake. Most of them are small, brown, woodland species and simply don't look edible. Collecting small edible species such as the Deceiver is, however, a dangerous matter if not done with care, as other species can be gathered from the vicinity and thrown in the basket unexamined.

The name fibrecap, it will come as no surprise, is a reference to the fibrous nature of the cap, the fibres conspicuously radiating outwards from the centre. The cap also looks a little like a tiny shield, when fully open, with a small 'boss' in the middle. When not quite open, they can look like something else entirely, as is indicated by the cream-coloured *Inocybe eutheles*, which, literally, means 'fibrecap with nice tits'.

Most are brown, but *Inocybe geophylla* is pure white and very common. There is also *Inocybe lilacina*, which is an almost metallic purple version of the same species and sometimes considered to be a variety of it. The latter could be troublesome if you are collecting Amethyst Deceivers, as the two species are often near to one another. Some, at least, of the fibrecaps contain muscarine (see p. 337).

The Deadly Fibrecap is the most dangerous, as it contains very large quantities of the toxin. Combining that with its vague similarity to *Agaricus* species and the fact that it is by far the largest of the fibrecaps, it is easy to see how it acquired its name. It grows in the summer in Beech woods.

Dapperlings *Lepiota* spp.

AGARICACEAE • SPORES WHITE • LATE SUMMER, AUTUMN

The most common dapperling you are likely to find is the Stinking Dapperling, *L. cristata*. It is small, at maybe 2.5 cm across, white with grey scales, and smells (quite pleasantly, in my opinion) of geraniums. It is found frequently in woodland and along woodland paths and is poisonous, but not deadly. None of the sixty or so (mostly very rare) British dapperlings is considered to be edible, and five, at least, *are* deadly.

Dapperlings are vaguely similar to, but much smaller than, the Parasols (*Macrolepiota*). The similarities are the speckled cap and a ring, or a ring

zone. If any supposed Parasol is found much under 12.5 cm in diameter then it is possible that it is a dapperling. I did meet a lady a few years ago who had picked dapperlings, thinking them to be young parasols. But young parasols have a round, closed cap, the whole young mushroom looking just like a drumstick which then opens out. They do not start life as miniature versions of the mature mushroom. You will be pleased to hear that the lady survived unscathed, but only after being seriously ill for a week. Having read all this, you may decide never to try Parasols, but you have my assurance that they are among the easiest species to identify.

Brown Rollrim *Paxillus involutus*

PAXILLACEAE • SPORES BROWN/SIENNA • SU MMER, AUTUMN

It would be an encouragement to us all if deadly poisonous mushrooms were rare – just enough danger and spice to keep us on our toes and interested, but with the chance of getting it wrong a remote one. There are

some species I always expect to find on a mushroom foray, and, sadly, the deadly Brown Rollrim is one.

It is a variable species, but its characteristics are nevertheless easily spotted: brown cap, which can sometimes attain a funnel shape, a raised boss in the middle and broad grooves at the edge. It is very slimy in damp weather, and the edge, believe it or not, rolls downwards. The gills are distinctly decurrent and a yellowish buff which quickly bruises dark brown. The stem is dark brown and quite firm.

Considering what I am about to write, it is quite astonishing that this species has long been eaten in quantity and was (and still is in some quarters) considered to be both safe and good. It is always boiled and the water thrown away before final cooking. This removes toxins that are water-soluble or destroyed by heat. Normally nothing bad will happen, but the body builds up a complex allergy to the fungus and, after years of consumption a final meal of Brown Rollrim is consumed and hell unleashed within the victim’s body. Andrus Voitk, in an article published in *Fungi* in 2012, lists what there is to look forward to: vomiting, diarrhoea, cramps, stomach ache, back pain, acute anaemia, collapse – possibly followed by

internal blood clotting, kidney failure, everything-else failure, coma and death. There is a name for this syndrome – autoimmune haemolytic anaemia – which involves your antibodies attacking and destroying your red blood cells.

With many people from Europe with a fine tradition of mushroom picking now living in Britain, this species is now collected for the table here. Just make sure it's not for your table.

Livid Pinkgill *Entoloma sinuatum* and allies

ENTOLOMATACEAE • SPORES PINK • LATE SUMMER, AUTUMN

Pink gills in mushrooms are usually associated with young specimens of *Agaricus* species, such as the Field Mushroom. Indeed, *Agaricus* species were once referred to as 'pinkgills'. It is unfortunate, then, that what are now known as 'pinkgills' are from an entirely different genus, *Entoloma*, none of which is edible and a handful of which are poisonous. The Livid Pinkgill is the largest and most poisonous of them, but mercifully quite rare. It is not a seriously poisonous species, causing 'merely' gastrointestinal problems, though these can be quite severe.

The Livid Pinkgill is a large mushroom of broad-leaved woodlands, where it sometimes grows in rather spectacular rings. The solid-looking cap is about 12.5 cm across when mature, though it can grow larger still. It is a pale grey/beige colour and smooth/silky in dry weather, sticky in wet weather. The gills are notably yellow when young, turning to pink as the pink spores mature. If you are unsure, make a spore print and you will see the pink colour, which will tell you that at least it is likely to be a pinkgill and not to be eaten.

There are many more pinkgills in both forest and field, some of which may be edible. But it is wiser to leave scientific researchers and the terminally reckless to find out.

Fool's Funnel *Clitocybe rivulosa*

TRICHOLOMATACEAE • SPORES WHITE • SUMMER, AUTUMN

The Fool’s Funnel is one of only two grassland species that might be of concern to anyone picking mushrooms in fields. There is the danger of lethal woodland species straying into fields, but, well away from hedges and trees, it is just the Fool’s Funnel and Yellow Stainer that are a consideration.

The Fool’s Funnel is an occasional mushroom of grassland, growing in rings or small patches. It is only 3 to 5 cm across, and an ivory white colour which often shows concentric, buff-coloured bands. The gills are slightly decurrent and white to grey/pink with age.

It could conceivably be thrown into a basket during a Fairy Ring Champignon spree, or be mistaken for a Field Mushroom or even a St George’s Mushroom, though the early season of the latter should make this

unlikely. It contains substantial quantities of muscarine, the ‘sweating’ toxin.

False Morel *Gyromitra esculenta*

AGARICACEAE • LATE WINTER TO EARLY SPRING

Every February for some years my friend Bryan and I would set off to an area just to the west of Poole Harbour. We had never seen a False Morel growing in the wild, but we knew there were records of it being found there some years before. We would walk for miles, but never found one. They are relatively rare in England, being more common in Scotland and the north of England. However, a friend of a friend found some near Bournemouth, so I live in hope.

Fortunately, kind people send me mushrooms, and the one pictured here (under the *Leylandii* in my garden) came from Scotland. At first sight it looks just like a Morel, but it lacks the honeycomb surface of the Morels, instead having a cap that looks like a screwed-up piece of brown leather. This is all you need to distinguish it from the Morel – and distinguish you must, as it can be deadly.

‘Can be deadly’ is enough warning for most people, but it does not get its Latin name for nothing. *Esculenta* means ‘full of food’, and it can indeed be eaten if prepared properly. ‘Properly’ involves boiling the mushroom in water and then throwing the water away, twice, though you are on your own with this one. The toxin, gyromitrin, is soluble in water, apparently. I have a tin of them imported from central Europe which I intend to eat one day. Just not yet.

Angel Wings *Pleurocybella porrigens*

MARASMIACEAE • SPORE WHITE • LATE SUMMER, AUTUMN

Angel Wings are a denizen of the north and mostly appear in Scotland. The growth habit, colour and general shape are similar to that of Oyster Mushrooms: hence their inclusion here. There is no obvious characteristic to which one can point to make an easy distinction, except that they always grow on dead conifers, whereas Oyster Mushrooms always grow on deciduous trees. They are very common in the Scottish Highlands but rare elsewhere in the north and virtually absent in the south, so are not a great problem for most people.

Now considered to be (deadly!) poisonous, Angel Wings is a species that has been eaten in the past and probably still is. Their fall from grace occurred in 2004, when there were seventeen deaths in Japan from encephalopathy in people who had partaken of the abundant harvest of the

species that occurred that year. A further forty-two became ill but recovered, and there was a further death in Japan in 2009. All the victims had existing kidney impairment. The action of the toxin does not create conspicuous symptoms for about two weeks, after which the victim suffers tremors, weakness of the extremities, seizures and, potentially, death a week later.

These tragedies have been minutely investigated, and a novel amino acid precursor called pleurocybellaziridine is in the frame. It breaks down in the brain to form amino acids which cause demyelinating symptoms. While there are many questions left unanswered, such as ‘Why Japan?’ and ‘Why did most poisonings occur in one year?’, the only question that comes to the

mind of the forager is ‘Should I eat them?’ But I think we all know the answer to that one.

Yellow Stainer *Agaricus xanthodermus*

AGARICACEAE • SPORES DARK CHOCOLATE BROWN • SUMMER, AUTUMN

We should be very grateful that the Yellow Stainer is by a very long way the commonest cause of mushroom poisoning in Britain. It would be better if no one was poisoned, but if you make a mistake with this species you will live to tell the tale – a tale I must have heard from a hundred people over the years. There is even a recorded case of Yellow Stainer poisoning from the nineteenth century.

The problem is this. The Yellow Stainer is in the genus *Agaricus* and looks very much like the Horse, Field and other mushrooms from the same genus. People picking Field Mushrooms tell me that they collected what they were completely sure were Field Mushrooms, only to be ill later. Some are more expansive: ‘Well, we were sure they were ordinary mushrooms when we picked them except that they looked a *bit* funny and went very yellow in parts. When we cut them up and cooked them they went even more yellow and a horrible smell came out of the pan. Anyway, we ate them. And then we were all ill.’ ‘Ill’ in this case means confined to (very small) quarters for at least twenty-four hours, and if your entire family ate the things, you had best have more than one such quarters available. No one, as far as I know, has ever died from eating this mushroom, though from the many accounts I have heard the consensus is that death would be a tempting release. However, the assault on the digestive systems is so severe that children and people with other health problems could conceivably perish if they ate a large quantity.

The toxic component is not firmly established, and is likely to be a cocktail of toxins, phenol among them. It is the phenol that produces the ‘horrible smell’ (think Elastoplasts) during cooking and a sure sign that something is seriously amiss. It is perfectly possible to identify in the field without even the need to pick one. Rub the edge of the cap of a young specimen. If it instantly goes a bright, chromium yellow, then it is a Yellow Stainer. If you are still not sure, then dig one up and squeeze the ring, then scratch away at the base of the stem. If either turns instantly yellow, then you have your ID.

The Yellow Stainer is perhaps, and annoyingly, the commonest of all the species of *Agaricus* in Britain, so you are certain to find one if you go mushrooming often. It is distinguished from its close and equally poisonous relatives such as the Inky Mushroom, *A. moelleri*, by its bulbous base. The latter is more of a woodland species and has a grey cap, making it less of a problem. The Yellow Stainer is very variable in the colour and texture of its cap, though most often it is pure white – hence the confusion with Field

Mushrooms. It seems to grow opportunistically in grassland, parkland and wood edges. I once found over a hundred perfect white specimens in a grassy ditch alongside a road. For a moment I thought I was going to be lucky, but they were all Yellow Stainers.

Sickener *Russula emetica*
Beechwood Sickener *Russula nobilis*
RUSSULACEAE • SPORES WHITE • LATE SUMMER, AUTUMN

These two species are almost identical, but distinguished by habitat. The Sickener grows in Pine woods, and the Beechwood Sickener always with Beech. Although there are many red brittlegills, these have a very bright scarlet cap, are pure white everywhere else, and a small piece nibbled for five seconds will burn your tongue. They are both relatively small. If you

discover what looks to be a Sickener but find it has a mild flavour, it isn't one. And if you are still *sure* it is a brittlegill, then it will be edible.

The Sickeners are only of concern to those who pick red species of brittlegill for the table – or perhaps anyone who is colour-blind and, in truth, should not be picking mushrooms in the first place. See p. 46. The result of eating either Sickener is obvious, though it is the only symptom.

Sulphur Tuft *Hypholoma fasciculare*

STROPHARIACEAE • SPORES BLACK • POTENTIALLY ALL YEAR

I have taken hundreds of mushroom forays in woodland, and on all but two or three occasions we have encountered a collection of Sulphur Tufts. They are poisonous, though not deadly. Few species in this book grow on wood, and all are distinctly different to the Sulphur Tuft, yet it is a species you must learn about.

It grows in dense tufts of up to a hundred specimens, usually from a dead stump. The individual mushrooms begin life looking rather neat and tasty, and if you saw them packed nicely in a supermarket you would likely buy them. Their commonness and youthful good looks make this species a frequent temptation: hence its inclusion in the poisonous section.

Young specimens are orange, fading as they open to a sulphur yellow while often retaining an orange centre. The cap shape is domed when young, more flattened when mature, but always with a bump in the middle. The gills quickly become black from the black spores; indeed, the caps themselves are often blackened by spores from other individuals. There is a fragile ring zone on the yellow stem.

Earthballs *Scleroderma* spp.

SCLERODERMATACEAE • SPORES BLACK • LATE SUMMER, AUTUMN

It is only puffball hunters that need to concern themselves with earthballs. There are three or four common species of earthball in Britain, and you need at least to be aware of them if puffballs are what you want. There is little to worry about, as they are very distinctive. Earthballs have thick,

leathery skins which are variously warty and various shades of brown or yellow. Cutting them in half will reveal the thick skin and also the mature or immature spore mass. If immature, this is nearly always black to dark brown; only occasionally in young specimens will it be pale. Puffballs have thin skins, and most of them are whitish on the outside. A sliced-open specimen will be pure white if it is young and edible.

Earthballs are not deadly, but they can cause unpleasant gastrointestinal symptoms, and nobody wants those.

Bitter Bolete *Tylopilus felleus*

BOLETACEAE • SPORES BROWN • LATE SUMMER, AUTUMN

The Bitter Bolete is not at all poisonous, just horrible. Not that I am appalled to find one – it is a splendid-looking species and fairly uncommon, I just do not want one ruining my Penny Bun à *la crème*. Its common name is very well deserved, with the whole fungus extremely bitter. This makes it easy to avoid, as all you need to do is nibble a tiny bit to be left in no doubt. It is superficially very similar to the Penny Bun – same size and shape – but the cap is more matt in texture, the stem darker and ornamented by a dark brown net, and in mature specimens the pores and tubes are distinctly pink.

PLANTS

Hemlock Water-Dropwort *Oenanthe crocata*

APIACEAE • WINTER, SPRING, EARLY SUMMER

It is generally agreed that Hemlock Water-Dropwort is the deadliest of all our native plants, and, unlike the infamous Deadly Nightshade, it is very common, at least throughout much of the south and west of Britain. In fact, in many parts it is one of only two or three plants to brighten the dull browns of early March with its rich green growth. By late spring it can reach 1.5 m high of lush leafiness. The common name provides a clue to its preferred habitat – anywhere wet. This could be stream sides, water meadows, damp hedge ditches, boggy areas and more. It is a rather beautiful plant and a member of the treacherous carrot family, the Apiaceae, complete with umbels of white flowers.

The problem with Hemlock Water-Dropwort is that all of it *looks* edible. The stems are like celery, the leaves like flat-leaved parsley and the roots appetisingly like a bunch of parsnips. Unfortunately, all of it is deadly poisonous, the roots, especially in winter and spring, being the worst.

I once met two women who had gone to dinner with a friend who promised them ‘wild parsley dumplings’. Having some knowledge, they were a little concerned, but also being British they quietly decided to face a horrible death rather than embarrass their hostess. They ate them. Then, casually, they enquired where the ‘wild parsley’ had been collected. ‘Down by the stream,’ came the reply. A brief field trip confirmed the worst. Fortunately, the small quantity of leaves, the cooking and the fact that the leaves are the least poisonous part ensured that they survived with no symptoms, bar one – that night, I was told, they enjoyed the ‘best dreams we ever had’. Do not try this at home.

My friends were lucky, but there are scores of reports over the centuries of people who were not. The *Belfast Northern Whig* of 1865 reports the case of six boys who collected and ate roots of the plant that had been exposed, temptingly, at the edge of a stream. Five survived, but one boy suffered from convulsions and rolled into the stream to drown while the

others were running for help. This seems to be bad luck compounded, but it is unlikely he would have survived as he had eaten ‘a great deal’. Poisonings of animals and people are not entirely a thing of the past, with modern reports all too frequent. A rise in an interest in foraging may be to blame for this – with people not appreciating the risks involved and failing to identify plants with sufficient, or indeed any, care.

The chemical that has caused such misery is a higher alcohol known as oenanthotoxin. It seems to have multiple detrimental effects on the biochemistry of mammals and a whole shopping basket from hell of terrible symptoms. Seizures are the most common, but vomiting, lethargy, sweating, slow heartbeat, fast heartbeat, severe abdominal cramps, death and much more add to the horror. Having been so warned and having studied the description below with more than usual care, you will not suffer any of this. If, however, by folly or misfortune, you do, act with great haste – Hemlock Water-Dropwort is deadly in small quantities, and you may have only a few unpleasant hours to live.

Hemlock Water-Dropwort is a bright green plant, growing vigorously in winter and spring. The flowers, a white umbel, appear in May or June. The stems are like those of celery and the whole plant hairless. The leaves are a rich green, broad and deeply incised, and the smell of any crushed part is acrid and unpleasant.

Hemlock *Conium maculatum*

APIACEAE • SPRING, SUMMER

Hemlock (not to be confused with Hemlock Water-Dropwort) is deadly, and since several wild species also in the carrot family are edible, it is essential to know of its existence and appearance. Hemlock is the femme fatale of plants, beautiful and deadly. It is tall and elegant, frequently reaching above 2 m in height after arising from its biennial root in the second year of growth. The smooth round stems are spotted with red and unmistakable in themselves; the leaves are like fine lace and the shape of ferns. The plant is entirely hairless.

Should you make a mistake and eat sufficient Hemlock (sufficient being not very much), then respiratory arrest will be your fate, gasping for a breath that will not come. Artificial respiration will keep you alive until the toxins (coniine being the chief culprit) are gone, but it can damage the kidneys, so you will not survive completely intact. Hemlock is famous for being consumed – willingly, it seems – by Socrates at his judicial execution.

The plant is found on wasteland and in hedgerows. It is common in England, with a preference for the south and east, coastal in Wales and restricted to the east coast in Scotland.

Fool's Parsley *Aethusa cynapium*

SOLANACEAE • SPRING, SUMMER

Although Fool's Parsley is not quite as toxic as its cousins Hemlock Water-Dropwort and Hemlock, it has unpleasant effects and can be fatal if eaten in

sufficient quantities or if the person is already unwell or a child. In 1875, in Scotland, three children were playing at ‘vegetable shop’ and ate Burdock, Yarrow and Fool’s Parsley. All were taken seriously ill, and the youngest, at only two years old, was not expected to live. I could find no subsequent report of his death, so maybe all was well.

It is a common plant in lowland Britain, though less so in Wales, where it is mostly coastal. Fool’s Parsley frequently makes a guest appearance in gardens and is particularly dangerous in this situation because, of course, it looks like Parsley – though not the curly kind. It also looks like Cow Parsley, but the leaves are more deeply incised.

Foxglove *Digitalis purpurea*

PLANTAGINACEAE • LEAVES ALL YEAR

The splendid Foxglove adorns our woodlands and hedgerows like an exotic import let loose. Yet it is a native species and found throughout Britain. It is also deadly. In 1928 the *Nottingham Journal* reported the ‘unpremeditated departure’ of a young farmer who drank a ridiculous amount of Foxglove ‘tea’ for his health, ending the piece with ‘Truly, danger lurks in beauty, and death in fragrance.’ A great many people have died from consuming this

plant either inadvertently or by their own hand, or, as too often seems to be the case, by that of another.

The toxin in Foxglove is powerful in minute quantities, disturbing heart rhythm and causing death. In even smaller quantities it is beneficial in people suffering from what is generally called congestive heart disease by regulating the heart. With a small dose being problematic, even handling Foxgloves can be dangerous. I met a lady recently who had been helping her friend who was a florist. The florist had collected Foxglove leaves, and the lady spent the day arranging them with other flowers but without the protection of gloves. By the end of her day she was feeling faint and missing more heartbeats than seemed advisable, though she soon recovered.

It is difficult to think of any plant for which Foxglove might be mistaken, but there is one. Comfrey (better known for fixing bones than hearts) is sometimes collected for food, though I have not included it in this book because of a cloud of suspicion that implicates it in liver disease. The leaves are superficially like those of the Foxglove: both are long and pointed and a little furry in texture, and if the plant is not in flower, the obvious and helpful identification characteristic is missing.

Yew *Taxus baccata*

TAXACEAE • ALL YEAR

Yew is one of our most dangerous plants. Just 50 g of fresh leaves (about a cupful) is enough to cause death, usually from heart failure. Cases of accidental poisonings are rare, and most of the recorded deaths appear to be intentionally self-inflicted. No doubt this is because we rarely eat the leaves of coniferous trees.

Pines are distinctly different from Yew because their needles are very long and come in pairs, radiating from the stems; those of the Yew are short and placed either side of the stems in a more or less single plane. With Spruce it is much harder to provide a simple differentiating character, as its needles are arranged in a vaguely similar way to the Yew. But Norway Spruce is the Christmas tree and familiar to all, so it should be clear which is which. The red, flaky bark of Yew is distinctive and unlike the fissured scaly bark of Spruce. The most obvious characteristic is that both Pines and Spruce produce cones, while the Yew produces red berries, though only in the autumn.

Deadly Nightshade *Atropa belladonna*
Woody Nightshade *Solanum dulcamara*
SOLANACEAE • ALL YEAR

Woody Nightshade, also known as ‘Bittersweet’, is a very common vine throughout lowland Britain, inhabiting hedgerows and wastelands. The purple, five-pointed star shape of the flowers, with a brightly contrasting yellow centre, makes it familiar and conspicuous.

Deadly Nightshade is worth a small mention. While it is deadly poisonous, it is both obvious and uncommon. The dark, purple-edged and bell-shaped flower and the single shiny black berry held in a star-shaped ‘cup’ of sepals make it easy to spot. Although it is often a plant of old gardens, it is native to Britain (though almost absent from Scotland and Wales) and found in the wild on calcareous soils. If you really want some, then I suggest the South Downs as a good hunting ground. There are also (or at least, there were) a few in the hedge around the car park at Old Trafford. I shall leave you to speculate why.

Henbane *Hyoscyamus niger*

SOLANACEAE • SPRING, SUMMER

At the behest of my wife I made a rare trip to the end of the garden a few years ago to see if it was worth making an effort to do anything with the vegetable patch. It wasn’t. However, I was delighted to find a crop of Henbane that had appeared from nowhere. Presumably the seeds had lain

dormant in the soil. It came back five years later, but I have not seen it since.

Despite its beauty, there is something of the *Little Shop of Horrors* about Henbane. The yellows and purples of the large flowers have a decayed look about them, and the whole plant is both hairy and sticky.

It is not a seriously poisonous plant unless consumed in some quantity, but it does have a few disturbing effects, some of them perceptual. Thus it has been used for recreational purposes, though I intend to stick to Ovaltine and a good Trollope.

It is an uncommon plant, with a southern distribution and a scattered coastal presence elsewhere. However, its ability to grow in disturbed ground means that you too could find some in your garden.

Thorn-Apple *Datura stramonium*

SOLANACEAE • SPRING, SUMMER, EARLY AUTUMN

Datura is a non-native plant that sometimes appears on wasteland and in gardens. It occurs in scattered locations throughout Britain but is mostly coastal in Wales and above Leeds. No one could mistake it for anything edible when it is bearing its long, trumpet-shaped flowers or its enormous, spiny, seed capsules, but when in leaf alone it has a passing resemblance to some of the Oraches and Goosefoots.

It is essential to learn about this plant because it is sufficiently common to be of concern and utterly deadly. The toxin it contains is atropine, the same as in Deadly Nightshade.

Lords and Ladies *Arum maculatum*

ARACEAE • WINTER, SPRING, SUMMER

The countryside of February and March offers a sparse and sometimes terrifying prospect to the forager, with the brightest and freshest of plants in view being Hemlock Water-Dropwort and Lords and Ladies. Both are deadly, though the first more reliably so.

Lords and Ladies is a common sight throughout Britain, appearing along hedgerows, in woodland and on wet ground. It would be more accurate to

say ‘sights’, because it looks completely different at each stage of its growth. The leaves appear very early in the year, followed by a single, spectacular flower, followed by the lone spikes of berries that rise incongruously from the ground. All parts of the plant are poisonous (except, perhaps, the thoroughly ripe berries), and there are several recorded deaths, mostly of small children.

The main toxic compound appears to be long, sharp crystals of calcium oxalate, which penetrate the lips and skin of the mouth, causing extreme irritation. Oxalic acid and its salts find frequent use in plants as a chemical deterrent to animals. This simple trick works exceptionally well in Lords and Ladies. I once, knowingly, nibbled the tip of a leaf stem. I immediately spat it out, but still my lips and tongue tingled unpleasantly, and there was soon a burning sensation in my throat. Add to this cocktail some bitter saponins, traces of hydrogen cyanide and coniine, the toxic component of Hemlock, and you have a very unpleasant plant indeed.

I have known several people pick Lords and Ladies to eat, even, in one instance, making a soup from it! And I have found some of its leaves in the communal basket we take with us on two of my public wild food forays, placed there by someone who had evidently not been paying close attention. What is going on?

It is simply a confusion between this plant and the perfectly edible Sorrel. Although they grow in different habitats and are only related in as much as they are both plants, the young leaves of Lords and Ladies look rather similar to those of Sorrel, both having backward-pointing lobes. The clue is that on Lords and Ladies the points of the lobes are rounded, whereas those of Sorrel are sharp.

Black Bryony *Dioscorea communis*

DIOSCOREACEAE • SPRING, SUMMER, AUTUMN

The common Black Bryony is a beautiful plant. The leaves are a light, translucent green, its veins arranged with artistic perfection. The berries are green, then orange, then red, and form on vines that drape prettily over hedges with all three colours displayed. This is likely to be the berry that your mother had in mind when she told you not to pick wild berries unless she was there: it looks good to eat but isn’t. Fortunately, it is not seriously poisonous. It does contain toxic saponins, but these have little ill effect, as they are not absorbed well. The main problem is the largely insoluble, needle-shaped crystals of calcium oxalate, which acts as a stomach irritant. Black Bryony is the sole native British representative of the yam family, Dioscoreaceae, named after the Greek physician and botanist Dioscorides.

The plant is very common in Wales and in England except the far north, and is almost absent from Scotland.

White Bryony *Bryonia dioica*

CUCURBITACEAE • SPRING, SUMMER, AUTUMN

White Bryony is much less common than its similarly vine-like near-namesake Black Bryony. It employs the same habitat – hedgerows and wood edges – and produces red berries but is in a different family. The leaves of White Bryony are maple-like, the lobes coming to a point with a little white spur. Its flowers are white to pale yellow, with green veins, and the berries form in clusters, not strings. It is in the cucumber family, so if you are familiar with cucumber or melon plants you will recognise White Bryony. It too is a gastrointestinal irritant, but it is a much more poisonous plant than Black Bryony. The juice of the plant can cause skin irritation and ulcers, and if any part is consumed in sufficient quantities, it is fatal. It is found in England south of Leeds, though rare in the south-west and south-east. It is rare too in Scotland and Ireland.

Dog’s Mercury *Mercurialis perennis*

EUPHORBIACEAE • LATE WINTER, SPRING, SUMMER, AUTUMN

Dog’s Mercury is the default understorey tree of woods and ancient hedgerows. It is very common and will completely cover a woodland floor. And it is poisonous. Cases of poisoning are rare, and deaths rarer still. There is little among the edible wild plants with which it may be confused, though the careless could conceivably collect it by mistake while cutting Wild Garlic. Brooklime (to which it bears no obvious similarity) has had

Dog’s Mercury picked in its place, though the two people involved recovered well. It is common everywhere except the very north of Scotland.

PRESERVING YOUR FINDS

BOTTLING

Keeping fruit juices fresh and fermentation-free is best done by bottling, a process that destroys micro-organisms and keeps them out of the juice. If you have a great deal of room in your freezer, then that will work too, though I rather like having bottles of stuff stacked around the kitchen and cluttering up the shed. It is easy to do, and bottled juices last for years.

Use clear, swing-top bottles of a size suitable for the intended use, though the smaller 300–500 ml bottles are best, as it is easy to waste half of a one-litre bottle of your hard-won juice by not using it before it goes off.

Fill each bottle with the juice or syrup until 2.5 cm short of the top. Place them into a stockpot with a tea-towel underneath and position the tops without sealing them in place. Add water until it reaches the shoulder of the bottle, and cover the pot with a lid. Heat until the water reaches 70° C, then close all the stoppers using gloves. Replace the pan lid and allow to cool slowly. I use this process in my gigantic 70-litre stockpot for rosehip syrup, sea buckthorn juice, apple juice and blackberry juice. Do remember to label everything with contents and date – a simple thing to do, but you will need a system if you are preserving more than one type of juice in the same boil: I am still opening bottles of blackberry juice only to find that it is full of rosehip syrup.

FRUIT LEATHER

This is a great standby for difficult-to-use hedgerow fruits. Stew up any combination of hedgerow fruits, (including crab or other apples if you can, but avoiding rosehips as these contain irritating hairs not removed in the process), with just a little water in the pan to prevent burning. Once the apples are soft, mash everything to a paste with a potato masher and push the resultant puree through a sieve. If it is tending more to fruit juice than a paste, reduce it gently in a saucepan, stirring to prevent sticking and burning. Sugar is not really needed, but dissolve some in the reheated puree if you have a sweet tooth. Spread the puree thinly on baking parchment, and place in a very low oven until dry to form a fruit leather. The resultant leather should be removed from the parchment and rolled up in a fresh sheet of parchment. It will last indefinitely if kept in a safe, dry place. For the artistic, 2.5 cm-diameter ‘puddles’ of puree dry nicely to discs which can be combined to form little flowers. Otherwise, just tear off a little from your sheet of leather for a snack, or cut strips to go with cheese or even game.

DRYING

My kitchen and pantry are packed with bags, boxes and bottles of dried plants, seaweeds and mushrooms, with the occasional wild marjoram or kelp collection hanging from the beam in the kitchen and getting in the way. In fact, I use dried wild food as much as I do fresh. Not everything survives the process intact, but most species certainly will, though in all cases the flavour dried will be a little different from the flavour fresh.

Drying is very straightforward, with little that might go wrong. Only seaweeds need to be washed. Mushrooms are only washed if they are muddy; otherwise they are brushed. Herbs should be picked from a place where they are not dusted with dirt by passing traffic. Fast but gentle, with very good ventilation, is the key to good drying. Fast and furious will work, but much of the flavour can be lost, while slow and gentle will usually result in something festering, not drying. Good ventilation is essential during the process. A friend of mine once sliced several kilos of perfect Penny Bun mushrooms, placed them on racks in the airing cupboard and

shut the door. After a day she looked to see how things were going, only to be hit with a fog of mould spores and the truly nasty smell of rotting mushrooms. A large surface area to volume ratio is also essential, which simply means that anything thick needs to be sliced.

Precisely how you dry your wild food will depend as much on the amount you have to dry as on what you have to dry. My preferred method for a small quantity of mushrooms is to slice them and place them on cake racks on a sunny windowsill. Hanging things in the kitchen or conservatory, threaded on a length of string, is another tried and tested method.

For larger quantities you will need a little more organisation. My first stop when I have 10 kilos of seaweeds, or 200 stinging nettle plants, is to lay them, well spaced, on the woven plastic top of my daughters' old trampoline. If you are not so blessed, then old (but clean!) bed sheets will do fine. It will obviously need to be a dry day, and with an encouraging weather forecast for the day after. You can usually get away with one light shower, but no more. If it is hot, sunny and with low humidity, then everything will dry out completely. If not, it will mostly dry out and be much reduced in volume, but need a couple of hours in a very low oven (50° C) to finish off.

For when the sun does not shine and the rain does not stop, there is the electric drier. These are stacking, mesh trays through which warm air is blown. I am very fond of these contraptions and have two. It is strangely soothing to spend time arranging your mushroom slices on the trays, and it all looks splendid when done. I always use the lowest temperature I think I can get away with, as a high temperature will fill the house with the glorious smell of mushrooms or herbs, a glorious smell that will no longer be where you want it. Unless you have a very sophisticated model, the racks will need their positions in the stack reversed at least once to ensure even drying.

There is one possibility that I intend to try after I have finished the garden wall, rebuilt the wood store and fixed the dripping tap. Dehumidifiers can produce warm and very dry air in an entirely enclosed space. They also blow the air around, making it, in my opinion, ideal for drying wild food.

If, and only if, your dried wild food is *completely* dry, it can be kept (for years) in a sealed container. If you are a little uncertain as to its moisture content, then canvas or paper bags will be fine, provided these are kept somewhere not at all damp.

It is perfectly possible to powder most, if not all, dried wild foodstuffs. It is my default position as it is more usable in powdered form, enabling you to stir in a spoonful of mushroom/seaweed/chestnut powder into anything you like, or even use it as an adjunct to flour in a roux. It is simple to do – make sure whatever you are powdering is almost crispy dry, and blitz it in a reasonably powerful blender. Shake the powder through a sieve, and return anything that will not sieve through to the blender for another try.

FURTHER READING

PLANTS

Francis Rose, *The Wild Flower Key: How to Identify Wild Plants, Trees and Shrubs in Britain and Ireland*, rev. p/b edn (London, 2006)

Clive Stace, *New Flora of the British Isles* (Cambridge, 2010) (The definitive guide, but largely picture-free and for true enthusiasts only)

David Streeter et al., *Collins Wild Flower Guide* (London, 2016)

FUNGI

Roger Phillips, *Mushrooms* (London, 2006)

Paul Sterry and Barry Hughes, *Collins Complete British Mushrooms and Toadstools: The Essential Photograph Guide to Britain's Fungi* (London, 2009)

SEAWEEDS

Francis Bunker et al., *Seaweeds of Britain and Ireland* (Plymouth, 2017) (General guides to seaweeds such as this are rare beasts indeed, but several guidebooks to seashore wildlife, including the one below, contain more than enough information on seaweeds for the forager)

Paul Sterry and Andrew Cleave, *British Coastal Wildlife* (London, 2012)

INVERTEBR ATES

Stefan Gates, *Insects: An Edible Field Guide* (London, 2017)

WEBSITES

www.foragerscalendar.net – which provides additional information

www.ediblebush.com – my own foraging website

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Much of what is written in this book comes from thousands of walks in wood and field and along seashore and hedgerow. But on many of these excursions I have been accompanied by a friend or two with a story, a recipe or an introduction to a species whose edibility I had not known. To all these people I give my thanks. Of special note, thank you to Bryan Edwards. No forager he, but rather a man with the slightly annoying ability to name every species he sees. My fellow members of the Forager's Association have been generous in their support, especially Monica Wilde, a dear friend and great forager, and Andy Hamilton and Mark Williams. Thanks are also due to Thomas Laursen, the great Danish forager.

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